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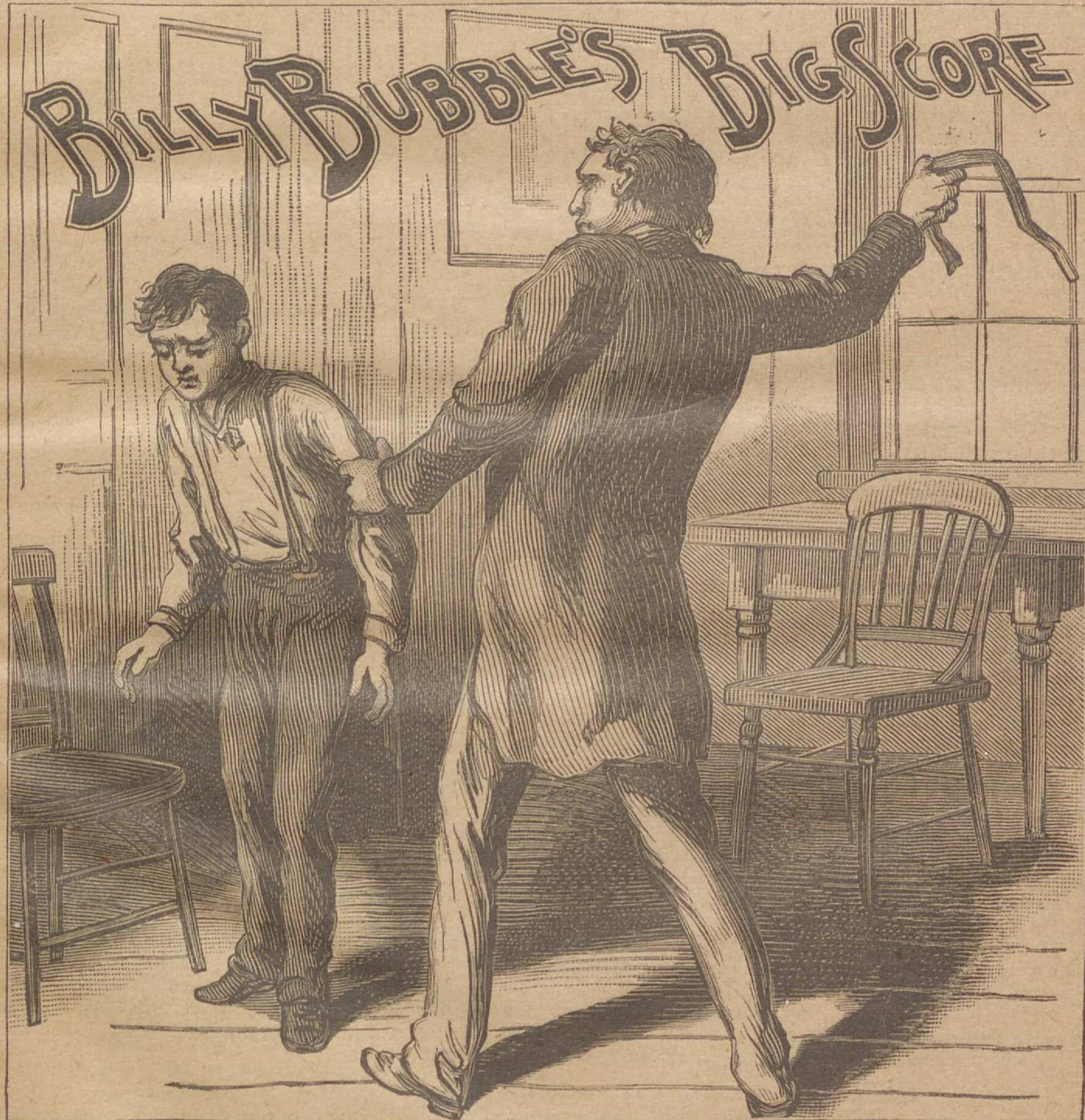
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HE BROUGHT THE STRAP DOWN SHARPLY ON BILLY'S BACK, COVERED ONLY BY A THIN SHIRT.

Billy Bubble's Big Score;

OR,

TIM, THE TRAMP.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PAUL, THE BOY SPECULATOR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT FARMER WILSON FOUND.

"WHAT sort of a queer bundle of rags is that laying there?"

So asked Farmer Wilson, as he checked his horses and drew up his market wagon by the roadside.

"Where?" asked his wife, who sat on the wagon-seat beside him.

"If you'd use your eyes, woman, you might save me the trouble of using my tongue," snarled the cross-grained farmer. "There!"

He pointed to a grass bank by the side of the way, where lay what seemed indeed but a grass bundle.

Yet a second glance revealed the fact that it was a boy, so crouched together that he looked as round as a ball, while his clothes were mere tatters.

He appeared to be fast asleep, though it was a cold March day. The water in the gutters at the roadside had on it a skin of ice. It was utterly unfit weather for anybody to be so exposed.

"Mercy on me, it's a human being!" exclaimed the good lady, holding up both hands. "A mere slip of a boy! Why, he'll get his death, as sure as he's alive. Wake him up, Jeremiah, for marcy's sake!"

"I dunno as it's sca'cely worth while," grumbled the sour old farmer. "There's plenty o' that sort of young vagabonds now. More than anybody knows what to do with. A cart-load of 'em wouldn't be missed."

"There's only the one in our sight, anyhow," exclaimed Dame Wilson. "And he sha'n't freeze to death before my eyes. What's more, Jeremiah," she continued cunningly, "you know we want a boy about the farm. Maybe Providence has sent this stray one, just to suit."

The old man seemed struck with the idea. He removed his hat and rubbed his bald head, while his little eyes twinkled down on the boy.

"Guess he hasn't any friends. Might get him cheap," he muttered. "Jist hold the lines, old woman. I'll get down and stir up the sleepy little vagrant."

He climbed down in a gouty fashion from the wagon, walked up to the boy, and stirred him with the butt-end of the long whip he held.

"Here! Wake up! Tain't no feather-bed you're sleepin' on, little slow-go-easy."

The boy groaned, turned over, and flung out his arms sleepily.

"Stir your stumps, now. Ain't goin' to keep me here waiting all day, are ye?"

At this harsh demand the sleeper opened his eyes and looked up. The first thing he caught

sight of was the whip, with its stout lash impending over him.

With a cry of terror he sprung up and ran back to the fence, where he crouched as if in mortal dread.

"Oh, don't scorch me, Mas'r Tim! Don't! I couldn't help it! 'Deed I couldn't! The old pan jist bu'sted itself!"

"What are you talking about, you scared rabbit?" demanded the farmer.

"He must be dreaming," suggested Mrs. Wilson, from the wagon.

The boy by this time had rubbed his eyes wide open, and stood gazing around him with a tone of bewilderment, though he still shrunk back from the whip.

"Who's Master Tim? And what brings you here?" asked the impatient farmer, catching the boy by the shoulder and shaking him sharply.

"Mas'r Tim?—Guess, maybe I were dreamin'.—Ain't he 'bout yere somewhar?"

He looked up and down the road with terrified glances, while he still crouched like a frightened rabbit.

"There's nobody here except me. What are you doin' here? Want to freeze, hey?"

"I dunno," said the boy, with a helpless look. "S'pose I'd best. Ain't much good to nobody, nohow."

"Come, wake up!" with another shake. "Who's Master Tim, I say?"

"Why, he's my boss," answered the boy, trembling. "He whopped me, jist fur nothin'. And then I sat down, kinder suddent, on a pan. And the old pan, it bu'sted. And then Mas'r Tim, he kicked me, orful."

The poor waif rubbed himself with painful recollection.

"Then he told me to git up and git, fur I wasn't wu'th soap. And he druv on, and I was afeard to foller."

"He deserted you in the road?" asked Mrs. Wilson, in a tone of pity.

"I dunno," answered the boy, looking up quickly toward the kindly face. "I walked, and I walked, and I walked, till I felt so holler I couldn't walk no furder. Didn't eat nothin' 'cept some acorns. Then I kinder toppled over, and reckon I got asleep. And I'm so cold and hungry; and I wish I was dead!"

The boy shivered under his miserable rags until his teeth chattered. And he looked so utterly woe-begone and helpless that even old Jerry Wilson's hard heart was touched.

He took the lad by the shoulder and led him forward, looking closely into his pinched face. The little fellow looked as if he had been half-starved. His face was dirty, and thin, and sunburnt, while dark elf locks hung down over his eyes.

Yet the features were regular and well-formed; there was a brightness in the eyes, even in his misery; his forehead was broad, and indicated intelligence. There was a promise in the face, though it had been ruined by want and ill-treatment.

"Jump into the wagon," cried the farmer. "You're as good as ten dead boys yet. I calculate we can find you something to eat and something to do. You've got to earn your grub with me, youngster, mind that."

The boy looked fearfully up, as if this was too good fortune to be real. His eyes glanced to right and left, like those of a cornered rat. Evidently he had been so used to ill-treatment that he feared these kind words would be followed by blows. Old Wilson's sour tones and wrinkled brows did not reassure him.

But the sight of Mrs. Wilson's motherly face, beaming down on him kindly, and her hand extended to assist him into the wagon, gave him new courage.

He timidly took her extended hand and climbed up into the ample market-wagon.

"There! Now snuggle down on the straw back there. You'll find it warmer than the cold ground. I declare, Jeremiah, the poor lad's skin isn't fairly covered with those sorry rags."

The farmer, who was now climbing back into his wagon, muttered some growling response, and took the reins from her hands.

"Guess we can rake him out some old duds, wife. There, now, let's stop chatterin', and get off home."

He gave the whip to his pair of lean-flanked horses, who started up at a slow trot, drawing the lumbering wagon behind them along the turnpike road.

The boy had coiled himself up in a heap of loose straw, that half-filled the back of the wagon. He crouched further back as he listened to the farmer's harsh tones. Yet his eyes were fixed gratefully on Mrs. Wilson's ample form. Kind words were something that had come but seldom into his sorry life.

Through the windy March day they drove on for several miles. At length they came within sight of a big farm-house, with various out-houses, that stood back, partly surrounded by trees, at some distance from the road.

A lane led up to it, closed at the roadside by a swinging gate.

"Now, youngster, let's see how spry you are," cried the farmer. "Jump down and open the gate. That'll pay for your ride. You don't get anything you don't earn from Jerry Wilson."

The boy in an instant was on his feet. He looked out hesitatingly, as if not quite understanding what he was wanted to do. Mrs. Wilson pointed to the gate.

In a moment the lad pushed between them, jumped to the front of the wagon, and then to the ground, with such nervous haste that he rolled over and over. But he gathered himself quickly up and ran to the gate, which he managed to open after some difficulty with the latch.

Mrs. Wilson looked at her husband with a smile, but the old fellow shook his head distrustfully.

"That sort o' thing don't last, Mother Wilson. He's lively enough now. But you'll see if he ain't crawling like a snail before a month. But if he does I'll wake him up—I'll wake him up."

"You'll make him run away, like the last one," she murmured, in reply.

"I reckon that's none of your affair," was his sulky rejoinder. "I don't want anybody to tell me how to manage my part of the business."

The horses were now moving through the open gateway.

"That'll do, little fellow," he called out.

"Shut the gate behind us, and be sure and latch it. Then toddle on up to the house."

He drove ahead, and brought the wagon to a halt in front of the stoop, paying no more attention to his young protege.

Mrs. Wilson got out, without aid from her cross-grained husband. She was a large and comfortable-looking woman, very different in appearance from her thin and angular spouse.

He drove on toward the barn, leaving her on the stoop. She looked for the boy who had made his way up the lane, and stood lurking beside a tree, as if afraid to come nearer. There was a very wistful look on his pinched face.

"Come here," she said.

He obeyed, in a hesitating manner.

"Now, little fellow, follow me into the house. I'll see if we cannot find you something to eat. You do look hungry."

The spare face brightened up at these words.

"I'm bu'stin' hungry," he declared. "I'm holler all the way down."

"Well, I won't engage to fill you up. But I'll hunt you a bite."

He followed her to the porch, and thence to the wide hall that ran through the house. Here she stopped to take off her wraps. Then she led on back, and opened the door of a rear room. It proved to be a kitchen. It was fully provided with cupboards, with pans and dishes, and all the kitchen paraphernalia, while a large stove stood at one side, sending out waves of grateful heat throughout the room.

The boy hastened forward, toward the stove, with an air of great delight. But he hesitated before he was half across the floor, and looked up with questioning eyes to Mrs. Wilson.

"All right, boy. Warm yourself," she said, waving her hand.

The only occupant of the kitchen was a buxom servant, who was just then engaged over some cooking. She looked around in surprise on the ragged stray, who snuggled his shivering limbs up to her warm stove.

"Who's this, Mrs. Wilson?" she asked, in a tone of discontent.

"A little chap that we picked up along the road, half-starved and half-frozen. Mr. Wilson is going to take him on as farm-boy. See if you can't hunt him up something to eat, Jane."

"Poh! he's too dirty!" cried Jane, lifting her nose in contempt. "Looks as if he hadn't smelt water for a month. And them duds must ha' been fished up out of a gutter. I don't want no sich lookin' snipe as that round my kitchen."

The boy moved tremblingly back from this harsh-speaking virago.

"You are too hard, Jane," said Mrs. Wilson, reprovingly. "You get out the food. I'll see to the rest."

She filled a basin with water and set it on a bench at one side of the kitchen, bidding him wash his face and hands.

He obediently complied. Yet it seemed an exercise to which he was not much accustomed. The dirt appeared to be ground into his skin, and Mrs. Wilson had to come to the rescue, with an abundant use of soap, before he got his face in shape.

This proceeding greatly improved his appearance. Though dolefully thin, the boy's face was

fine in its outlines, and something of Jane's frown smoothed out as she now looked at him.

"I thought there was some sort of a face under that dirt," she muttered.

"Come with me now, little one," remarked Mrs. Wilson. "I will see if I cannot get you some clothes to replace those rags."

She led him from the room, his eyes hungrily turned back to the cold meat which Jane was taking from the provision closet.

It was ten minutes and more before Mrs. Wilson and her *protégé* returned. He was now greatly improved in appearance. His ragged garb had been replaced by a suit of patched, yet whole and warm attire, the discarded property of Mr. Wilson's last farm boy.

It fitted him very well. His form, though rather stunted, was good, and there was something attractive about the lad, as he stood before his two new friends, his eyes involuntarily turning toward the lunch which Jane had set out for him.

"Well, I'll allow he isn't a bad-looking chap, after all," declared Jane, with a look of interest.

"Now, my boy, sit down, and see what you can do with that cold meat."

The lad needed no second invitation. He went at the food with the ravenous haste of a starving animal. He evidently had not been brought up to the graces of the table, but snatched and tore at his meat like a veritable young savage.

"The child is starving," said Mrs. Wilson aside to Jane.

"He's had no bringin' up," answered Jane. "He's been a regular young tramp."

Mr. Wilson now entered, and stood looking rather sourly at the scene. The lad continued to eat until he had devoured every particle of food, without heed to the parties who were observing him. He looked regretfully at the empty platter.

"Ain't put as much inside me at a time fur ten year, I know that," he muttered.

"Nor won't soon again, while you live here," growled the farmer. "I believe in feedin' boys comfortable; but I don't believe in making hogs of 'em. There's nothing kills a boy as quick as over-feeding."

CHAPTER II.

THE STORY OF A STRAY.

"WHAT'S your name, boy?"

The little stray was perched on a high chair in front of his new master, who was seated like a judge before him, with pursed-up mouth and wrinkled brows. The timid lad started as this question came at him sharply and harshly.

"I dunno," he answered, in a helpless manner.

"Don't know your name."

"Little devil, I reckon. That's what Mas'r Tim allers called me."

"Why, you outrageous young sinner! Don't say such words here again. Now tell me your name. Didn't nobody call you anything else?"

"Missus used ter call me Billy. Sometimes she said dod-rotted little Bubble. Them's all the names ever I heered."

"Billy Bubble? Well, that's a queer name."

anyhow. Now see here. I want to know all about you. Who are you? Where were you born? What are you doin' vagrantin' along the road?"

"I dunno," answered the boy, with a look as if his ideas were sadly mixed up.

"You don't know where you were born?"

"Reckon I never was born. Just come, somehow. That's what Mas'r Tim allers said, and I s'pose he knows."

"Don't say Master Tim to me again," snarled the farmer angrily. "Who is this Master Tim?"

"He's my boss," the boy crouched and trembled. "It was him allers whopped me when I was bad. Reckon I allers was bad, 'cause he was allers a-whoppin' me. 'Cept when he kicked me."

"Poor little fellow," exclaimed Mrs. Wilson, who was listening. "He has had a hard life of it."

"How did you live?" asked the farmer.

"We lived trampin' and wagonin'. Sometimes we tramped and sometimes we wagoned. Reckon we begged some and peddled some. And we went everywhere."

He flung both hands out expansively, to illustrate the extent of his travels.

"A sort of Gypsy life, eh?" The farmer shook his head doubtfully. "I don't like that. I suppose you have dreadful habits. Did you ever steal?"

"Mas'r Tim did," said the boy, simply.

"But you."

"I never did. I wouldn't!"

"You wouldn't, eh?"

"No. And Mas'r Tim used to lick me orful, 'cause I wouldn't. But I jist wouldn't."

"Well, well, the boy has good principles," exclaimed Mrs. Wilson.

"Or else he's lying," growled her husband. "Most likely he's lying."

"I never lie," said the boy, with the same quiet simplicity. "Used to git whopped fur that, too. But I jist wouldn't lie."

"Laws, what a young angel we've took in," snarled the old farmer. "See here, boy, who taught you not to lie and steal? How long have you been going round with this Master Tim?"

"I dunno. Forever, 'most. Don't know nothin' 'cept trampin' and gittin' whopped."

"But, where did you learn not to lie or steal?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"I dunno," answered Billy, looking up with a blank countenance.

"This is a queer story, wife," said the farmer. "The boy has been beaten and starved till his brains are all muddled. I don't understand this Mas'r and Missus business.—What was Tim's other name?"

"Mas'r. Mas'r Tim. That's all I ever heered."

"Was he your father?"

This question produced an unexpected effect on the boy. He sprung hastily to his feet, his face blazing with anger, his eyes flaming.

"Him my father!" he screamed. "No, no, no! Wish I might die fu'st! I'd sooner say that there dog was my father! I hate him! I hate him! I'd like to kill him!"

The furious boy looked like a veritable little

savage in his sudden and unexpected rage. Mrs. Wilson laid her hand soothingly on his shoulder, and glanced meaningfully at her husband.

"But you must have some father and mother. Don't you remember anything else? See if you can't think of the days before you began to tramp with Master Tim."

His excitement seemed allayed by her soothing touch. The fire in his eyes died out, and a softness as of tears followed. There was something very gentle and engaging about the boy as he stood there, his large eyes fixed on vacancy, his face working as if with an inflow of new recollection. Any judge of human nature could but have seen that the boy was of good blood.

"Yes," he replied in a far-away tone. "I can see a fine house, with nice things 'bout it, and pictures, and everything. And a handsome man, and ever so pretty a lady. And— and— Oh, my! It's the same as my picture! The face is the same as my picture!"

These last words were spoken in a tone of glad surprise. The boy's eyes widened with wonder. He fumbled at his throat, and drew up a narrow cord, from the end of which dangled a plain gold locket.

"Look here. This is the lady," he cried. "I jist see'd her in that fine house."

His fingers fumbled at the spring in the locket. It sprung open at length, and revealed a miniature portrait, on which the farmer and his wife hastened to gaze with great curiosity.

They saw the face of a brilliantly beautiful woman, though with a somewhat pensive countenance. There were jewels in her ears and hair, and the painting was done on ivory. The locket was of gold, plain but heavy.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson exchanged glances of surprise, while the boy remained in rapt contemplation of his prize.

"Where did you get that picture?" asked the old man.

"Why, missus, *she* guv it to me. She hung it round my neck, and said as how Mas'r Tim mustn't never know 'bout it, or he'd jist squash it 'way fur rum. Oh! the beautiful lady!" His eyes were fixed with rapture on the portrait.

"Do you remember anything else about the fine house, and the handsome gentleman and lady?" asked Mrs. Wilson, who was burning with curiosity.

"No. It's all gone now. It comes to me sometimes that way. Jist like a dream. Reckon 'tis a dream. Reckon I've been all my life trampin' and wagonin' with old Boss Tim. He kicked me t'other night, 'cause I wouldn't steal a chicken. And he whopped me 'cause I bu sted a pan. Then he told me to git, fur I wasn't wu'th soap. And he druv on, and I was 'feared to foller. And—and—that's 'bout all. 'Cept the feed you give me. Tell you that was jolly good! Mas'r Tim made me eat 'tater-parin's, and sich grub."

They continued to question the boy, but they got very little more satisfaction out of him. He had undoubtedly been starved and ill-treated till his wits had been set wandering.

Yet his appearance, the miniature, the vague recollection of superior conditions, even

his determination not to lie or steal, all indicated that he could not be the child of wandering tramps. It looked as if he had been stolen when young, and had been dragged for years around the country by the man and woman vagrants of whom he spoke, and finally set adrift by them when they found they could make no further use of him.

Mrs. Wilson's sympathy was strongly excited toward the little waif. But there was very little of that feeling in her husband's hard head. What he could make of him was all he thought of.

He looked at the boy, knitting his surly brows together in an ominous fashion.

"See here, Billy Bubble," he began, in his sour way. "Would you like to live with me, and do chores about the farm, and get your grub and clothes?"

Billy looked up with anxious hope.

"Oh, can I? Will you let me?" he pleaded, with clasped hands.

"Well, maybe. If you'll try and be a right good boy. You've got to work hard, mind."

"But I kin have stiddy grub?"

"I won't feed you on potato-parings, anyhow."

"I'll do anything, anything, if you only don't whop me. And you too, lady. You've spoke so kind."

He caught Mrs. Wilson's dress, and carried it to his lips in an excess of gratitude.

A grim smile marked old Wilson's lips.

"There, now," he said. "You needn't begin work regular till to-morrow mornin'. You can have a holiday to-day."

"A holiday? What's that?" The boy looked up in wonder. "Never heered on it afore."

Mrs. Wilson clasped her hands in surprise at this ignorance.

"I mean you can run around and look at things, and have a good time. Just go round the farm and hunt up the cow-pastures, and see the men feed the pigs, and look into the barn, and ask 'em questions, and find out all you can. You can get fun and learnin' in together. Now scoot."

He opened the door and pointed out. The timid boy looked at him again for permission, and then darted out with a glad cry. The innocent little fellow did not catch old Wilson's idea, that his holiday was to be spent in preparations for work.

The two looked significantly at each other after the boy had disappeared.

"There's something very odd here," said the farmer, shaking his head. "That boy's been kidnapped, Mother Wilson. There ain't no doubt of *that*."

"It seems so," she replied. "And he has been the child of rich parents. I wonder if we can have any way of finding them, Jeremiah?"

"Mebbe so," he rejoined. "We might advertise. But that costs money. If we could only find those tramps, they might be made to own up."

"Kidnapping cases are all published in the papers. Now if you could hunt up the papers about the time the boy must have been stolen. Let me see. How old do you take him to be?"

"Mebbe fifteen or sixteen."

"And he's been three or four when he was stolen, or he wouldn't remember so well. That takes it back about twelve years ago. You must look this up, Jeremiah. There may be some money in it."

"I sartainly shall," he replied, pressing his hat down firmly on his brows. "And, meanwhile, we'll hold on to the lad, and make him earn his grub. I won't have no idlers about my house, eating their heads off, now I tell you!"

He frowned as he stepped out of doors. Mrs. Wilson, with a sigh, went back into the house. She distrusted her husband's hard nature. Little Billy was not likely to have an easy life.

Meanwhile the boy, all unconscious of these plans, was wandering about the farm, happier than he had been for years.

CHAPTER III.

A BOY'S FARM LIFE.

"COME, stir your lazy stumps. You've had sleep enough for two boys."

Little Billy opened his eyes in fright. He was sleeping on a hard trundle bed, in a cheerless room in the attic of the farm-house. Yet to him, accustomed to severe exposure, it had seemed a veritable Paradise, only the night before.

He looked up tremblingly into the sour face of the stern old farmer, who was bending over him.

"Ain't goin' to whop me, be you?" he asked, fearfully.

"Not till you deserve it. But it is time to be at work. Can't afford to snooze away daylight round here. Jump up now. Get on your duds. You've got to begin to dig in."

Billy silently obeyed.

"Now toddle down-stairs. You can find a basin in the yard to wash your face. And there's water in the rain-barrel, after you've broke the ice. Then go hunt Jake in the barn. He's goin' out to milk the cows, and I've told him to larn you."

"I kin milk cows," answered the boy. "Jist you bet I kin!"

"Why, where did you ever larn?"

"Used to milk 'em o' nights, fer Mas'r Tim. Out'n the pastures, you know."

"Mercy on us!" Old Wilson held up both hands. "And you said you never stole."

"Why, that wasn't stealin', was it? Jist milkin' 'nough fur break'est!"

"I'd clapped you in jail for it, if I'd caught you. Now slide!"

Billy made his way down-stairs, in haste to get away from the farmer, of whom he stood in deep dread.

He found the basin, and washed his face and hands in ice-cold water. Luckily for him this was no new experience. He had many a time been tossed bodily into a freezing stream by his cruel "mas'r."

He then made his way to the barn. Here he discovered Jake, the farm-hand, a rough-faced countryman, who was just about beginning the milking.

Billy delivered his message to Jake, who paused, and surveyed him from head to foot, as a rat-terrier might look at a mouse.

"Sent you out yere to help me milk, did he,

the old fool?" growled Jake. "What do you know 'bout milkin'?"

"Plenty," answered Billy, with cool confidence.

"You do, you midget? Well, we'll see. Yander's a milkin'-stool. And yere's a milk-bucket. Pitch in on old Brindle there. And, mind you, if she kicks over the bucket, and spills the milk, you'll catch rats. Old Jerry won't stand no nonsense."

Billy picked up his stool and bucket, and approached the cow which had been pointed out to him. It was a contrary-looking brute, with something of old Wilson's surliness in its face.

In fact Jake, provoked by Billy's confident assertion, had wickedly pointed out to him one of the worst milkers in the herd.

He looked askance at the boy, as he approached the cow.

"I rayther guess old Brindle 'll take some of the starch out o' the youngster, spite o' what he knows 'bout milkin'."

But to his surprise Brindle did nothing of the kind. Billy approached her softly, patted and smoothed her sleek flanks, and talked to her in a low, cooing voice. The restless animal quieted under his touch, and remained quiet when at length he proceeded to milk her. Somehow the boy seemed to have charmed the uneasy cow.

Jake looked round from his stool with utter astonishment.

"Well, I'll swear!" he ejaculated. "If Brindle don't kick the boy and the bucket over 'fore it's full, then I'll sell out."

But Brindle did nothing of the kind. Billy got safely away from her, and went quietly to the next cow.

"See here, you little rasher o' bacon!" cried Jake. "Where the blazes did you larn how to milk? That clean beats me out."

"Used ter do it o' nights, when we was trampin' round," answered Billy. "That's whar I learnt ter keep 'em quiet. S'pose you never done no moonlight milkin'. Mas'r Tim larned me."

"Oho!" cried Jake, with a new light in his face. "Moonlightin', hey? That's how you been brung up? I knowed there were somethin' queer. 'Twasn't 'cordin' to natur'."

The milking proceeded after that without a word. Jake was vanquished. Billy displayed the skill of a practiced hand. Master Tim's lessons had taught him something.

The milking finished he went in with Jake to breakfast. He was still very hungry, and eyed the plain but plentiful meal with ravenous eyes.

"Kin I have my sheer o' grub?" he asked timidly of Jake.

"Reckon so."

"Jist as much as I kin eat?"

"Pitch in. Mought as well make hay while the sun shines. Old Jerry'll cut down your 'lowance before long."

Pitch in he did. Small and spare as the boy looked he was desperately hungry, and he made a havoc on the table that caused Jake to open his eyes with wonder. His own appetite was no small one, but Billy had quite beaten him.

"Well, churn me up, if the boy ain't a scrounger!" he exclaimed. "Where the blazes did

you stow it all, anyhow? Wouldn't ha' thought there was room enough in your carcass for such a cartload."

He caught Billy by the shoulders, stood him up and looked at him suspiciously, as if he fancied that the boy must have stowed the victuals in some mysterious bag. Jake shook his head doubtfully as he released him.

"I swow I can't understand it. It's the fu'st time I ever see'd anybody put a quart o' meal in a pint measure. Reckon the boy's larnt sleight-o'-hand somewhere."

He turned away to report to Mr. Wilson, whom he quite surprised by his report of Billy's feats with the milk pail.

"The boy has been a sort of Gypsy," explained the farmer. "They have ways of their own of charming cows and horses, the plundering vagabonds."

The milking episode was but the beginning of Billy's first day on the farm. He was not left many idle minutes till sunset. He was sent to feed the pigs, to drive the cows to pasture, to pile up some fire-wood, and on a dozen errands about the farm, that kept him steadily busy.

Ere night he was completely worn out. He staggered with exhaustion on coming in to the supper-table.

In fact, the vagabond life of the boy had unfitted him for any steady labor. The tramp Tim had made him work hard enough at times, but as a rule his life had been a lazy one. Work is not one of the failings of that class of people.

"What's come o' your appetite?" asked Jake, as he saw the boy picking listlessly at his food. "Ain't stowin' away supper like you did breakfast."

"I dunno," answered Billy, as he got up and left the table. "Mebbe I'm too tired. Jist feel 's if I was fallin' apart. Is it this way allers, farmin'?"

"Reckon it's wuss," answered Jake. "Only doin' up chores now. Wait till the frost's out, and we git to plowin' and sowin'. Then you'll see."

"Then I don't b'lieve I'll like farmin'," answered Billy, stretching his weary limbs on a bench.

Within two minutes he was sound asleep.

Jake looked down on him, with some show of pity coming into his rough features.

"Poor little devil, you're only beginnin'," he remarked. "Jerry Wilson drives a hoss hard, but he drives a boy harder. You're eatin' your white bread now, my little lad."

That day was a fair example of many days that followed. The boy was kept at it steadily, day and night. The work he did might not have been too much for a strong lad, but for one of his starved and puny frame it was exhausting. He went steadily down in strength, in spite of regular meals and sound sleep.

Otherwise the farmer did not treat him badly. He was harsh-spoken, but not really unkind in his treatment. In fact, the farm-hands looked on in some surprise. Old Wilson's hand and whip had been as ready as his tongue, with previous boys. He had had a dozen of them in his time, and nearly all had ended by running away.

But there was a reason for his behavior that he kept to himself, or revealed to nobody but his wife. In fact, he felt that he had a possible prize of value in the little waif, and that it might be safest to nurse his hopes a little.

He made quiet efforts to find the supposed kidnappers, Master Tim and his wife. He also sought to discover what child-stealing incident had taken place twelve years ago.

Mrs. Wilson meanwhile had noticed with some concern, that the boy was failing in strength, and growing if anything more puny and miserable-looking.

"You're killing that boy, Jeremiah," she declared vigorously. "Look at him. Why, he's going into a rapid decline. You're working him too hard. He's never been broke in to work, and hasn't got the strength for it."

"I ain't goin' to have him lazing round here," growled her husband. "I don't believe in shirks."

"You'll have him in a sick bed if this keeps on," she positively asserted. "If you'd use your eyes you'd see that. Look at his pinched face. It will not do us much good to find his parents if we only have a corpse to offer them."

The old man walked away with a growl on his lips, yet Mrs. Wilson was shrewd enough to see that her words had told. The labors of the boy were eased from that time forward.

And the effect of good food and moderate labor soon showed themselves. Billy's weary appearance disappeared. He began to gain strength and flesh. His boyish life had made him tough in enduring all sorts of weather, and his good constitution now began to tell. By the time spring had opened into summer he was quite a different-looking lad, earnest and ardent, and happy in his work.

And he had not been slow in picking up ideas of farm labor. He was already becoming a useful hand. But there was one thing remaining from his old life that he could not break himself of. He was incorrigibly careless. Where a thing fell, there it lay. He had lived in a hit-or-miss way so many years that it was not easy to break him into habits of neatness or system.

Old Wilson gritted his teeth as he saw signs of the boy's carelessness. Nothing escaped his twinkling eyes. Yet he contented himself with an occasional snarling admonition. He held himself in. It might not pay to break out just now.

He fancied that he was on the track of the waif's parents. He had, by searching old files of papers, discovered an account of an abduction that had taken place some thirteen years before, of the only son of rich parents.

He had written to these parties and was awaiting an answer.

Under these circumstances his treatment of Billy grew easier than ever before, and the soft-hearted lad, who had never known any but the harshest treatment, began to feel some sentiment of affection for his sour-faced employer. As for good Mrs. Wilson, he felt a real love for her.

One day, about mid-June, the old man came in from a visit to the neighboring village with

a frown on his wrinkled face that betokened that something had gone wrong.

"Where's that young rascal lazing now?" he growled, in a snarling tone. "There's some of the pigs got through that hole in the fence that I told him to nail up last night. Nothing'll do till I try the strap on the lazy little scamp."

Mrs. Wilson looked up in alarm. There was something ominous in the tone.

"Send Jake out," she said. "Billy has gone down to the potato field, to take something to Harry."

"He's always where he oughtn't to be, and never where he ought to be," grumbled her husband. "I've got to turn over a new leaf with that boy. I won't stand his dratted carelessness, there now! The lazy young hound don't half earn his feed. I'm goin' to bring him down to dots, wife. He's had too much to eat and not enough to do. Jest wait. I'll larn the youngster something. And we'll see if the strap won't make him do what he's told."

"What's wrong, Jeremiah?" she asked, looking at him steadily. "Have you heard anything?"

"Yes," he snarled. "Got a letter. We're on the wrong track altogether. I believe the boy's a young liar. I believe he stole that medallion. And I ain't goin' to be robbed by him any longer. I'm goin' to make him earn his feed, the lying little tramp."

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAW OF THE STRAP.

"WHERE 've you been, you lazy young rascal?"

Billy looked up in surprise. Farmer Wilson had not been in the habit of addressing him in such a tone. The old fellow's face looked as if he had just swallowed a quart of vinegar.

"Why, I were on'y down to ther store, fur Jake. He sent me down arter a scythe-sharpener."

"Jake better 'tend to his own business. Didn't I tell you to mix up the hog-feed?"

"I'm jist a-goin' to do it now, Mas'r Wilson."

"When I say a thing's to be done I want it done. Now you mind that. You've been having too easy a time 'round here. You're getting fat and sassy. Tell you what, youngster, you've got to be broke into the traces. Do your hear that?"

"Yesser," answered poor Billy, utterly upset by this change of manner. "I want ter do jist whatever I kin, fer ther's never nobody been so good to me."

"Drop that palaver now. I don't want no blarney. You're too thick with Jake. I'm goin' to break that off. And I won't have you eatin' with him any more. He's fattening you up like a yearling pig."

The little fellow looked pitifully up into the face of his harsh master. He had been so happy. Was it all a dream, and was he just now awaking?

"I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf, I tell you. You've not been earnin' your salt. I won't have no more of this lazing and high-feeding. I

didn't pick you out of the gutter to go birdnesting. Do you understand?"

"Yessir," faltered Billy, with a very downcast countenance.

"Then go mix that hog-feed. And, mind your eye sharp now. Don't leave things layin' round, like you generally do, or you'll catch it."

Billy walked away with his head down. What spirit the boy had by nature had been kicked and beaten out of him, and as yet he did not feel the slightest inclination to turn on his harsh task-master.

Yet any one could see that he had not the instincts of a slave. The time would come when he would turn.

Old Wilson meant every word he said. The failure of his effort to find any parentage for the boy had satisfied him that he was a lying impostor, and had told a shrewd tale to win his sympathy.

"The young villain has cheated me," he snarled to his wife. "And he's fooled you into coddling him up. I'll larn him a lesson or two. I'll show him if he can play that game with Jerry Wilson."

For the next six weeks Billy's life was a hard one. He was driven with work from sunrise to sunset. He was half-fed on the scraps from the farmer's table.

No matter how fiercely the sun blazed or how furiously the rain fell, he was forced to the fields to do his full day's work.

But he would have stood all this without complaining, if his life had been endurable otherwise. He was of a tough constitution and was hardened to all sorts of weather, while he had grown hearty and strong in his two months of good treatment.

But Jerry Wilson was not content with this. He cherished a regular spite against the unfortunate lad, which he took every opportunity to display.

Billy's carelessness gave him plentiful excuse. Now he had left a slop-pail out of place. Now he had forgotten something in the field. Now he had neglected to hitch the cart-horse, and old Dobbin had gnawed the fence. Now a gate had been left open, and the pigs had strayed into the clover field.

For all this the careless boy caught it heavily, not only from the farmer's tongue, but from the farmer's hand.

There was a leather strap always ready, which was used without mercy over his shoulders and legs. Or if the strap was not handy the surly farmer did not hesitate to bring fist or foot into play.

"I'll cure you, or I'll break your neck," he hissed. "You're enough to set a man crazy with your heedless ways. But I tell you what, you tramp, you've got Jerry Wilson to deal with, and he's cured worse cases than you."

To all this Billy made no answer and no resistance. He knew his faults, and he bore his punishment like a man. He had been used to it all his life, and took it as one of the regular parts of his existence.

But do what the farmer would he could not make the boy cry or shrink. If he had been beating a wooden statue he would have had as much effect.

"S'pose I got to grin and bear it," said Billy, to himself. "But he ain't goin' to see me squirm, if he kills me. Reckon it's all right 's long's I do leave things layin' round. Mas'r Tim, he used ter lick me fur nothin', and I did kick 'g'in' that. But I s'pose I 'arn my lickin's now."

One thing was sure; Farmer Wilson had taken the wrong means to break Billy Bubble of his careless habits. He simply roused a spirit of defiance, which made the boy worse than ever. At first he made some efforts to amend his ways. But as this gained him no redress he grew revengeful, and began to leave things out of place from pure spite.

"He'll lick me anyhow, no matter what I do," argued the poor lad. "Reckon I'd best guv' him somethin' to lick me fur."

From that time on he worried Farmer Wilson's soul by his perverseness. If there was a bit of awkwardness that would annoy the old man more than any other that was the thing he was sure to do. And he came up to his punishment as cheerfully as a pig comes to his rations.

"I've 'arned it, anyhow," said Billy to himself, with secret satisfaction. "Reckon I kin take it. S'pose I keer fur his old strap? Not much."

And so the weeks passed by, the wheat harvest came and went, and the corn was growing apace, and nodding greenly in the fields.

"It's a confounded shame, the way Mr. Wilson treats that boy," declared Jake, who had taken a fancy to Billy. "The lad's careless, I know; but that ain't no way to break him of it. Why, he's the wuss-used boy we ever had, and that's sayin' a good deal."

"I know it," answered Mrs. Wilson, to whom these words were addressed. "I have talked with Jeremiah, but it does no good at all. He is just set. You don't know how it tries me, to see him treat the little waif so cruelly."

"I'll tell you what it is," rejoined Jake, "that boy won't stand it forever. He ain't no tramp's brat, that's born without spirit. Ther's good blood in him. And he'll show it yet. He ain't no mongrel dog, now you'll see."

"I don't care if he runs away. I wish he would," murmured Mrs. Wilson, with tears in her eyes. "I've done all I could, and it's no use."

"I'll tell you this, if that boy does run away he'll leave his mark behind him. I've been watchin' him some lately, and I can see he's b'ilin' inwardly. He's addin' things up, you'll see. Ther's gettin' to be a touch of the Old Boy in the youngster's eyes. If I don't go wrong Jerry Wilson 'll be sorry yet for what he's doin'."

That such a spirit was rising in the ill-treated waif there were certain signs to show. He bore his punishment more inflexibly than ever, but with compressed lips and flashing eyes that indicated an inward revolt. The time was coming when Jerry Wilson would be astonished.

Yet the surly old farmer was the last to see this. His spite against the boy increased as time went on. Mrs. Wilson's efforts to make him merciful only hardened his stony heart.

"The young liar made a fool of me," he

harshly replied. "See if I don't pay him up for it."

This went on until one warm afternoon in August. The boy had been at work in the fields all day, and came in weary with his labors, to attend to some duties about the house.

Old Jerry was on the porch as he came up. The old man looked seriously out of sorts, as if something had gone wrong with him. His eyes lighted up on seeing Billy. Here was a chance to let out his ugliness.

"Where've you been?" he asked harshly.

"Down to ther 'tater-field," answered Billy. "I come up to 'tend to ther chickens."

"And how about that feed I told you to cut yesterday? Is it done?"

"I hadn't no time," explained Billy. "I were busy weedin' clean up till dark. I'll cut it arter I feed the chickens."

"I'll cut you, you lazy young hound. Go out to the cow-shed, and bring me that strap, and come to me in the spare room. You want a little dressing down."

Billy turned away with compressed lips. The tide of rebellion was rising rapidly in his soul. There would be an outbreak before long. He did not relish being whipped because he could not do two boys' work with one boy's hands.

But he said nothing. Old Jerry, with his face screwed up to punishment pitch, sought the spare room. He did not imagine that the boy would dare disobey his orders to come there with the strap.

Nor had Billy any notion of carrying rebellion to such a pitch. He walked in after a minute or two, and silently handed his master the thick leather strap. His face was slightly pale, and there was an unusual look about his mouth and eyes. But no word came from his lips.

"Now shet that door, and take off your jacket."

Billy silently obeyed.

"We're goin' to see who's boss here, Billy Bubble. If you won't obey orders I'll scorch your hide, that's all."

He caught him by the shoulder, and brought the strap down sharply on his back, covered only by a thin shirt.

Billy never winced. Through dint of repeated whippings his skin was too thick to be easily hurt.

The farmer, occupied by his revengeful thoughts, had not heard a carriage stop at the door several minutes before.

Down came the strap again. This time, to his surprise, it broke into two pieces, and half of it flew across the room.

Jerry, with a cry of surprise and suspicion, let loose his victim, and looked at the broken end of the strap. It had evidently been cut nearly across. There were the marks of a sharp knife.

He sprung at the boy, and caught him in a fierce grip.

"You did this?" he hissed.

"I didn't say as how I didn't," answered Billy, defiantly.

"You young gallows-bird! So you're trying that trick, are you? It won't help you any, you spawn of a tramp! Take that! and that!"

With his two hands he struck the little fellow right and left on the ears, knocking him flat to the floor. Not content with this, in his ungovernable fury, he kicked him spitefully as he lay.

That kick turned the tide. In an instant the boy wriggled round, with the quickness of a cornered rat, and sunk his sharp teeth in the farmer's leg.

Through clothes and skin they went, until they met in the flesh. It was a bite given with all the strength of powerful young jaws.

The astonished farmer kicked and howled, but the plucky little fellow held on, sinking his sharp teeth deeper and deeper, with all the concentrated rage and hate of his long-repressed revenge.

Old Jerry yelled and danced, dragging his antagonist about the floor.

At that moment the door opened and the face of a strange gentleman appeared. It was the person who had just before driven up in a carriage.

He stood looking for a moment in astonishment at the strange scene.

"Help! Help!" yelled Jerry, in agony. "Take him off, or he'll have a piece out of my leg."

The stranger hastened to his rescue, but it was not easy to make Billy loose his hold. He was only dragged off by main strength. When at last pulled to his feet he spat out a mouthful of blood. His hair was disheveled, his clothes torn, his eyes glittering with the rage that still possessed his young soul.

"What is the matter?" asked the stranger, shaking Billy rudely.

"He is a little savage! I'll pay him for this! I'll pay him well for this!" yelled the farmer. "Help me with him! I'll lock him up and starve him into his senses!"

The stranger obeyed. Between them, though with some difficulty, they dragged Billy upstairs, and to his own room in the attic, into which he was sent with a rude push.

He stood in the middle of the floor like a young tiger, glaring out on his foes. It was the first time the stranger had got a good look at his face.

He started violently, and uttered an exclamation of surprise, just as the farmer slammed the door shut and hastily locked it.

"That boy!" cried the stranger. "Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"Why do you ask?" demanded Jerry, with sudden interest.

"I have seen that face before. Who is he? Tell me all about him."

CHAPTER V.

WHAT JONAS STARK HAD TO SAY.

In the parlor of the farm-house sat Jerry Wilson and the stranger. The latter was a person of sharp countenance, keen gray eyes, and solid chin. There was something sinister about his face. One would have said he was a man that it was best not to trust too far. Yet he was well dressed and looked respectable.

The farmer had got his wound dressed, yet he did not feel quite comfortable. Billy had bit deeply and shrewdly, and the bite of a boy

in a rage is sometimes poisonous. The old fellow writhed. He was not sure but that hydrophobia, or some other terror, might come from it.

"The ungrateful little wretch!" he growled. "I've a notion to pull all his teeth to stop his biting."

The stranger looked at him shrewdly.

"What has he got to be grateful for, Jerry Wilson?"

"Didn't I pick him out of the gutter, and bring him here, and give him a home, and his regular victuals? What was he but a tramp's castaway? He was straight on the way to the State's Prison only for me. And this is his gratitude."

"A tramp's castaway," repeated the stranger, knitting his brows.

The farmer looked up with renewed interest.

"What was it you said up-stairs, Mr. Stark? Something about the boy seemed to strike you odd."

"Why, yes," answered Mr. Stark, reflectively. "I fancied I saw something in the boy's face. But if he is only a little roadside vagrant—"

"I fancy he is more than that," broke in Jerry meaningly. "What was it you saw? Tell me." He was eager with curiosity.

"I never empty my bag till I see what's in my neighbor's," retorted Mr. Stark, dryly. "Possibly we are on the track of something useful. But I will not start on a fox-chase till I am sure there's a fox."

"I thought the little villain was lying," answered Jerry. "I thought he was trying to play on me for a soft home. I've been a little hard on him to pay him up for it. But what if he told the truth after all? What if he didn't steal that locket?"

"What locket?" asked Stark, quickly.

Jerry looked up. Should he tell this man his story, or try to learn from him what he knew? One glance sufficed. It was evident that Jonas was not the man to be played for with an empty hook.

"I'll tell you all about it," said Jerry, with a sudden show of confidence. "On condition that you tell me what you know afterwards."

"It's a bargain." Mr. Stark stretched himself in a listening attitude.

"Well, then, this is the story."

Jerry proceeded to relate the circumstance of the finding of Billy Bubble, and the events that had succeeded. He told of the boy's apparent recollection of a rich home in his childhood, and of the golden locket, with its beautiful and refined face.

"But one cannot believe these strolling gentry," he concluded. "They are taught to lie from their childhood. I tried the boy's story, and could find no trace of any abduction. So I fancied he was deceiving me. And that riled me a little, now I tell you."

"It looks like it," answered Stark coolly. "The boy has been taught to use his teeth, as well as his tongue."

"I'll pay him up for it, the young vagabond!" snarled Jerry, with a twinge of pain,

"I'll starve him into his senses, blame his ugly picture!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Jerry Wilson."

The irate farmer looked sourly up into the steady face before him.

"Why won't I?"

"Because you're not a fool. Have you got that locket?"

"The boy has it."

"Then we must get it from him. And you must treat him well. Mind me, you must treat him royally. If you drive that boy away with your rough usage you ought to be kicked for a fool."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jerry eagerly. "You've had my story. Now let me have yours. If there is anything in this we'll go pards, you and me."

There was a queer look in Jonas Stark's face.

"I guess we will," he said dryly. "You can keep your end of the rope and I'll keep mine. I don't think either of us is to be trusted too far."

"Are you going back on your promise? I always thought Jonas Stark was a man of his word."

"So he is," answered Jonas, with a knitting of the brows. "I'll tell you this, the boy's face is familiar to me. He is the very picture of a gentleman I have seen more than once. And there is a story of trouble about that gentleman's early life. I don't know just what it is, for it did not interest me. It may have been the loss of his son by kidnappers."

He spoke thoughtfully.

"Can you find out?" asked Jerry, with deep eagerness. "Who is this gentleman? Tell me his name. Tell me all about him."

"When I knew him he lived in San Francisco. He was very rich. Where he is now I have no idea."

"But he can be found? You can discover what that mystery was?"

"I judge so."

"And you can trace his movements?"

"I can try."

They fell into silence, their eyes fixed on the table between them. But each cast an occasional lurking glance at the other. They seemed to be measuring each other's strength.

"He is very rich," muttered Jerry, at length. "Then, if you are right, there may be money in this?"

"Yes."

"Shall we go for it?"

"Yes."

"On what bargain?"

"Half and half. That is fair. You find the son, and I find the father."

"I agree."

The two conspirators clasped hands across the table.

"I must see that miniature portrait," said Jonas. "It may serve to settle my mind. I have seen this gentleman's wife. She was a very handsome woman. The boy remembers the face, you said?"

"Yes. He declared he could see a beautiful lady, just like the face of his picture."

"Then I must see it. Let us go up at once."

Jerry shook his head, and twisted his face awry, as there came a sharp twinge from his wound.

"Not now," he suggested. "He's in a frightful humor now. I don't want another fight with the little savage. Wait till he cools down some. You're not in a hurry?"

"I can wait if it will pay me to."

"Then stay and take supper. I'll send some food up to the boy. That may help to pacify him. We will see him this evening. Now let us talk over that other business, that brought you out from town."

The business between the two sharpers occupied the remainder of the afternoon until the supper hour.

The farmer then led his guest out to the dining-room, where a plain but plentiful meal awaited them.

"Put on an extra plate, wife," ordered Jerry. "Mr. Stark will take supper with us."

Mrs. Wilson obeyed, though with inward unwillingness. She had her reasons for not liking Jonas Stark.

But her opinion seemed to trouble that gentleman very little. He ate heartily, chatting away in the most unconcerned manner, without regard to the fact that Mrs. Wilson took very little part in the conversation.

As for Jerry Wilson, he had next to nothing to say. He had the farmer's habit of eating without talking. Yet he managed to say one thing, that wonderfully surprised his wife.

In the middle of the meal he ceased operations over a cut of cold beef, and looked up.

"Jane," he said, "just fill a plate with victuals, and take it up to that young rascal in the attic. Here's the key. Take care you don't let him out."

Mrs. Wilson and Jane raised their hands and their eyes in utter astonishment.

"Gracious me!" exclaimed Jane, quite unable to contain herself.

"What's that?" snapped out Jerry. "Do you hear me, woman? Are you in a plot to starve the little fellow?"

"You said yourself he shouldn't have a mouthful," faltered Jane.

"Well, I say now he shall. I reckon I've got a right to change my mind if I want. There, that will do. Don't let us have no words."

Jane retired with the key, wondering if an earthquake had shook up the old man's brain.

Jerry turned again to his supper, not saying another word till the conclusion of the meal.

But there was considerable whispering among the women folks in the kitchen. Think as they would, they could not catch the drift of this astonishing circumstance.

"I wonder if it's a symptom?" remarked Jane.

"Looks to me as if Jeremiah was going into a decline," answered Mrs. Wilson.

"Maybe he's skeered," suggested Jake, who was present. "Never had a boy to bite him afore. Shouldn't wonder if he was skeered."

During this debate in the kitchen, and the parallel debate of the two gentlemen in the parlor, the evening passed rapidly on, and the

shadows of night began to spread over the earth. It was a cloudy day, and looked as if the night might be dark and stormy.

Jane reported that the prisoner was still surly and defiant, with his great eyes blazing like two angry stars.

She had soothed him a little, though, and coaxed him to eat his food.

This report induced the conspirators to delay still further their visit to the little rebel. It was Jerry's idea to try and get on the right side of the boy again, and he wanted to give him time to change into a softer mood.

Mr. Stark had consented to stay all night. His horse was put away, and he sat chatting with the farmer till the hour of ten struck from the tall clock in the corner.

"Guess we'll go up now," said Jerry. "It might be wisest to let Billy have a night's sleep, but I ain't got the patience. I want consarnedly for you to see that portrait."

"I hope it will pan out rich," returned Jonas.

Taking a candle and the key to the boy's room, Jerry led the way up-stairs.

All seemed quiet within when they reached the low attic where Billy slept.

"Asleep, I reckon," said Jerry. "Just hold the candle, while I try the key."

Jonas took the candle. In a moment more the door was unlocked and thrown open. They looked anxiously in as the candlelight penetrated the room.

The boy was not visible.

His small bed could be seen from where they stood. It was in a tossed-up state, but was not occupied.

"Snooked down in the corner, I judge," muttered Jerry. "Fetch in the candle, and let's see where he's hiding."

Jones entered the room, and the two looked around them, with eyes that rapidly opened with surprise.

The candle rays penetrated every nook and corner of the small apartment, but no trace of the boy was to be seen.

A simultaneous exclamation broke from their lips. The dormer window was hoisted. Jerry ran to it and looked out on the roof, with the idea that the prisoner might have climbed out there.

Yet no trace of him was visible.

"See here," cried Jonas, with an oath. "The sheets have gone from the bed. What's that white thing dangling over the gutter? Sure as shooting we're dished, Jerry Wilson. The boy has made a rope of the sheets and lowered himself down. He's given you leg bail."

A cry broke from the lips of the avaricious farmer. He leaped out on the roof and looked over its edge. Jonas was right. There hung the bed sheets, tied together and twisted into a rope. One end had been fastened to a strong nail in the roof gutter. The other reached within a few feet of the roof of a lower shed. From that it would be easy to descend to the ground. The whole thing was out. The bird had flown.

The conspirators looked at one another with distended eyes.

There was a show of anger in Jonas Stark's face,

"You've killed the goose that was to lay the golden eggs, Jerry Wilson," he sneered. "It serves you right, too. You were too rascally hard on the boy."

"No, no!" cried Jerry. "He can't escape! He sha'n't escape! We must follow and capture him. He can't be far. There's only two roads. We'll take your carriage and follow one. I'll send Jake out on the other. If it takes us all night we must run the little scapegrace down."

The idea was too good a one not to be at once put in execution. Down-stairs they went at a bound, rousing the whole house as they did so. Jerry quite forgot his sore leg in his excitement.

It was not many minutes ere the carriages were out, and scouring the roads. Jake taking one direction, Jerry and Jonas the other.

"It will be ten dollars in your pocket if you bring him back," cried the old farmer to Jake.

"I'd sooner give him ten dollars and tell him to run," muttered Jake to himself. "But I s'pose I've got to obey orders."

Far along the road went the pursuit. The night was as dark as it had promised to be. There was as yet no rain, but the thick clouds made it a miserable night for a search.

Even a boy without Billy's education as a tramp could have escaped without difficulty on such a night. It was sheer folly to attempt to discover the young vagrant in the darkness.

"We're only wasting time," declared Jonas, at last. "I tell you my idea, Jerry. The boy will make for the city. But it will take him all night to get there. He'll go to sleep after awhile under some hedge, and toddle on to the city in the morning. Now suppose we drive back to the farm and report, and then drive on to the city. We can watch the incoming roads in the morning, and ten to one we nab the runaway."

This suggestion sounded hopeful to Jerry, and was at once adopted. The carriage was turned back toward the farm.

To their surprise a strange red light struck their eyes. It was a crimson glare, from the exact direction of the farm, and growing broader and brighter every minute.

"What is that?" cried the alarmed farmer.

"The Lord knows!" returned Jonas, putting the whip shrewdly to his horse.

The animal bounded rapidly along. Quickly the distance they had passed over was retraced. The ominous light ahead grew rapidly.

"It must be about your place," suggested Jonas.

"It's my barn!" screamed Jerry, in an agony of fear. "It's my barn on fire! That boy has set it afire out of revenge! I'll kill him! I'll kill him, the rat!"

On dashed the horse, at double speed, toward the growing flames.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DANGER OF A DROPPED MATCH.

We must return to the adventure of Billy Bubble. But it is not necessary to repeat in detail what we already know. It is enough to

say that the boy's spirit was fully roused, and he had made up his mind to submit no longer to the injustice of the hard-hearted farmer.

He had eaten his supper because he had made up his mind to run away, and did not know when he would get another meal.

Just where he would go he had no plans. It was to get away he wanted. What was to come after could take care of itself.

As soon, then, as darkness had fairly settled over the earth, he proceeded to put into effect the plan he had laid.

He had already discovered the spike in the roof to which he could fasten his improvised rope. Taking, then, the sheets with which Mrs. Wilson's kindness had provided his bed, he twisted them into a rope-like form, and tied them together.

Then attaching them firmly to the spike, he lowered himself over the edge of the roof, and trusted his weight to the weak support. He was light of weight, and it held firmly.

Billy, in his old days, had been trained in all sorts of athletic performances, and he ran down the rope like a squirrel.

Reaching the roof below he stopped for a moment to take breath, and to glance back over the road he had come. To his surprise and alarm he heard voices, and saw a gleam of light coming from the window of his room.

With a hasty movement he clambered down the steep-sloping roof of the shed, and sprung lightly to the ground below. Here he crouched in the corner by a water-barrel, and waited.

He heard a cry of anger from the roof above, and looking up saw the harsh face of Jerry Wilson, illuminated by the candle-light, and looking full of demonish fury.

A momentary shudder passed through the boy's frame. But it was succeeded by a feeling of resolution. He shook his fist at the face in the darkness.

"I'll die afore I'll lift a hand fur you," he muttered. "I ain't no dog, to be kicked. And I won't stand no more o' that from nobody, if I've got to starve fur it."

But what was to be done? He heard the voices above talking of immediate pursuit. The light disappeared. They were hurrying down-stairs. He must take some action at once.

Billy's resolution was made in a moment. He knew all the tricks of tramps. In an instant he rose and glided rapidly back along the shed to the shelter of an out-house. There was a light shining from a window of the kitchen, but he managed to keep under shelter till he reached the barn.

This he entered just in time, for at that moment the house door opened, and Jerry and his visitor came out, loudly talking. They were followed by Jake, who carried a lantern.

The fugitive rushed into the depths of the barn, and hastily climbed to the haymow, where he quickly buried himself under the fragrant heap.

He listened intently to what went on below. Were they about to make search for him? No, they were getting out horses, and drawing the carriages from the carriage-shed. He could hear them talking of pursuit.

"I hope you'll find me," said the boy, with a

laugh of security. "But I'm 'feard you'll have a dry ride, and nothin' to show fur't. I'm not goin' to be kicked by old Jerry Wilson no more, not if I die."

Billy remained for a half-hour snugly concealed under his pile of hay. He was in doubt whether he had best stay there all night, and take flight before daylight in the morning.

But there were two things made him uneasy in his covert. One was the possibility that his pursuers might think of searching the barn on their return. The other was certain strange sounds which he had heard for some time, and which annoyed and frightened him.

It was not the horses moving in their stalls below. It was something odd and stealthy, with an occasional low growling sound as if a suppressed human voice.

Billy crept from his covert. He fancied that he was not the only tenant of the barn. Had some roadside tramp crept into it for a night's rest?

To his fright he saw before him a faint spark of light, which very dimly revealed the outlines of a human face, that looked like a phantom in the shadows. But whatever it was it gave him a start of deep terror. There was something frightfully familiar in those dim outlines.

The boy was too well-posted in this sort of thing to fancy that he saw anything supernatural. He knew that the dim spark came from a pipe in the mouth of a vagrant, who had stolen into the barn.

But who was that vagrant? Was he mistaken in his fancy that he recognized that face? He hurried with little caution over the hay toward the ladder that led down to the lower floor.

A cry from the corner of the mow where he had seen the spark. The next instant there came a sharp crack, and the light of a match flared out, illuminating a brutal and savage face, and throwing its glare over the form of the escaping boy.

Billy could contain himself no longer. His fears were fully confirmed.

"Mas'r Tim!" he screamed, with an accent of terror. "Mas'r Tim!"

"Burn my eyes, if it ain't that young devil, Billy Bubble!" cried the tramp, in a loud voice.

He dropped the match and sprung up in pursuit. But Billy had the advantage in knowing his ground. One quick leap took him to the opening, and he went down the ladder almost at a plunge.

The tramp followed, swearing horridly.

Billy had the start, and fear winged his steps. He ran to the barn door, sprung out, and hurried across the garden. Reaching its extremity he jumped the fence into the cornfield that lay beyond. Over this he hastened toward a piece of woodland on the other side of the field.

The pursuing tramp followed, still cursing at every step. He caught a glimpse of Billy in the garden, and chased him with all haste, though his lumbering steps were soon left behind by the swift-flying boy.

His course through the cornfield led him to the side of the road that ran past in that direction. Here he paused to take breath, leaning on the fence.

"What the blazes do I want with the little

houndsanyhow?" he grumbled, hoarsely. "Reckon it'd do my feelings good to give him a kickin'. But I wouldn't take him in tow ag'in fur a barrel o' simmons. I don't want nothin' to do with the brat since that gol-darned woman shet down the rations, and cut stake. Wouldn't I make her bleed if I could on'y find her ag'in! Oh, no! Not much."

Shaking his head waggishly, he turned round, with an idea of going back to the barn, and completing his night's rest.

What was that he saw? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. There was a strong red light shining through the cracks of the frame structure. It was a light that grew stronger and redder even as he gazed.

Amazement took possession of his senses. He struck his head, while a fierce oath came from his stubbly lips.

"By the eternal jumper!" he declared, "it was that match! I dropped it 'mong the loose hay, when I jumped up of a sudden to chase the boy. Lor' bless my eyes if I ain't gone and set the ternal barn afire!"

He stood and looked at it with staring eyes. The flames seemed rushing like wildfire through the dry hay. He could hear the cries of women from the direction of the house.

The tramp seemed stupefied.

"What in blazes is to do?" he asked himself. "If they s'pect they'll scour the country, and snatch every tramp within ten mile. Ha! I've got it!" He struck his head with a laugh of devilish malignity. "There's that boy, Billy Bubble. I kin swear I see'd him runnin' away from the barn. They'll catch him lurkin' somewhar round yere. Won't I pay up the little rat fur runnin' away from me, like's if I was goin' to hurt him."

Full of this new idea he hurried up toward the house. The flames were now breaking through the cracks in the haymow, and licking the dry wood with their red tongues. The horses in the barn were kicking and plunging with fright in their stalls.

The tramp came running hastily into the farm-yard, where Mrs. Wilson, Jane, and the other women of the house were helplessly wringing their hands, and screaming in frantic terror.

"What's bu'sted yere?" cried the tramp, in well-simulated surprise. "Who set that there barn afire? What's you women about, anyhow? There's hosses in there. Ain't you goin' to git 'em out! Don't want the poor beasts to roast, do ye?"

He ran hastily to the barn door, tore it open, and plunged within. The flames were yet confined to the upper story, though flakes of burning hay were dropping down at intervals, and the dry bedding below was beginning to burn.

There were two horses in the stalls, who were snorting and screaming with terror, and pulling frantically at their strong leather hitching-straps.

Tim ran up, drawing his knife as he did so. Two quick strokes across the tense straps and the animals were free.

They backed hastily from their stalls, but showed no inclination to leave the burning barn. They were in that condition of blind

terror in which horses will stand and be burnt up, stubbornly refusing to move.

At this moment two or three other persons rushed into the barn. They were some of the neighbors, who had been drawn thither by the glaring flames, which were now visible far and wide.

"Git out ther machines and things," screamed Tim, who was tugging at the horses. "I'll fotch out these critters."

But the more he tugged and pulled, the less they seemed inclined to go. They snorted and reared, and at length stood in trembling stubbornness, refusing to move a step.

Meanwhile the neighbors were busy, dragging out the farming machines and implements which were stored in the barn.

"Come here and help up with this thresher," cried one of these persons to Tim. "You might as well leave those horses. They've got the death-terror on them, and nothing will move them. They're bound to stand and burn."

Tim stood and looked at the quivering animals. He hated to be beat, but what was he to do?

At that instant a bunch of blazing hay dropped through the floor, which had burnt through at that point, and fell at his feet. An idea shot into his active brain.

"Who says I can't make hossee go?" he yelled.

He stopped and picked up the blazing bunch, lifted the tail of one of the horses, and clapped it beneath.

He got away just in time, for the tortured animal's two heels shot back like a pile-driver, against the woodwork behind.

The animal danced about for a moment, screaming with pain and terror, and then dashed madly for the door.

The other horse looked after it with dubious eye. But Tim was not to be beat. He snatched up a pitchfork that lay handy, and thrust the sharp prongs a full inch into the poor creature's flanks.

It was enough. The startled animal broke after its companion, dashing forward with such mad haste that the men at work over the machine had to run for their lives.

"Who says I can't make hosses go?" yelled the tramp in triumph. "Now I'll guv you a jerk on that old machine."

His additional aid started it, and in a moment it was run out of the barn door, and on to the grassy slope beyond.

Other men were now hastening up from different directions. But it was growing dangerous to enter the barn. The floor of the haymow had been burnt through at a dozen points, and great flakes of burning hay were dropping down. The wood-work of the horse and cow stalls was already in a blaze.

At this moment a light carriage came dashing up, driven at a furious pace. It was drawn sharply up, and Jerry Wilson sprung to the ground, yelling with rage and terror.

"It was that boy! It was Billy Bubble!" he screamed, beside himself with fury. "Where is he? Chase him! Catch him! He shall hang for this! He shall hang!"

"The boy?" exclaimed Tim the tramp, instantly taking the cue. "I see'd a bov running

away as I come up. He looked kinder skeered. A little, stunted sort o' chap, with a sharp nose."

"That's him! That's him! He set it on fire! Chase him! Catch him."

"You'd best look out to save your house first," exclaimed one of the cooler bystanders. "Hurry, lads! Get buckets! Bring up water! We must wet all the roofs. They're scorching with the heat already."

Jonas Stark, who stood at his horse's head, looked askance at Tim. The bloated face and ragged garb of the latter were not reassuring.

"You saw the boy running away, did you? And who are you? I think it will be as well to give an account of yourself."

"I'll tell you who I am. I'm the fu'st feller as got inter the barn. It was me saved the hosses from being burnt up. And there wouldn't been much gct out on'y fur old Tim. These gen'lemen and ladies 'll tell you that."

"That is so," came the general cry. "He has done more than any man here. You can't say a word against him."

"He's a mighty seedy-looking customer anyhow," muttered Jonas. "And I don't like his face. His name's Tim, is it?"

Meanwhile efforts were being made to save the house and the remaining buildings. Buckets were quickly procured, and water dashed over the roofs. And, fortunately, at this moment, the heavy clouds began to send down their freightage of rain.

It came in scattered drops at first, but soon descended in a heavy shower. The men retired to the shelter of the house. Nature had come to their aid, and was doing more for them than they could do.

But the barn was utterly past saving. It still burned furiously, and long before morning was only a heap of smoldering ashes, in which the rain-drops hissed like living serpents.

But the fire had spread no further. All the other buildings had been saved.

Jonas Stark led the farmer aside.

"It is a bad business," he said, in a meaning tone, "but perhaps not so bad as you think."

"What do you mean?" asked Jerry, turning on the speaker his eyes bleared with rage and grief.

"That boy might be worth to us more than the barn. And this gives us a first-rate chance to catch him. We have all the country to help us."

"He set it afire, the little villain!" snarled Jerry.

"Whether he did or not we had best say so. We can raise the hue and cry through the country. And we can telegraph to the city and put the police on the lookout. He can't escape us. Maybe the barn-burning will turn out a lucky job."

Jerry looked at him dubiously.

"I'll drive over to the village, and wake up the operator. We must telegraph at once. Meanwhile you set the people on the hunt for the boy. There's that tramp. He ought to be a good hound to chase a fellow-tramp. Offer to pay him if he brings in the boy. And take good care to keep track of that dingy fellow. I have an idea about him."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT BECAME OF BILLY.

BILLY BUBBLE, after crossing the cornfield, had entered a bit of woodland that lay beyond. It was a narrow strip, bordering a brook that ran down that way.

Here he paused and looked back, to see if he could catch sight of his pursuer. This looking back had the same effect on him as on the other parties we have named. He caught sight of a red light shining dimly through the cracks of the barn, and growing stronger every instant.

At first Billy did not know what to make of it; but he could not remain long in doubt. It grew with frightful rapidity. The barn was on fire. He remembered the match which his pursuer had dropped among the loose hay, and the whole difficulty shot into his mind in an instant.

But what was to be done? He stood like a bird that has been charmed by a snake, looking at the frightful vision. He could not tear his eyes away from it. He was sure that the blame would be laid on him. Tim would take good care of himself. He felt that he ought to be in flight. But he could not stir a step. Those climbing flames held him fast as by a rope of steel.

The fugitive flung himself down by the bank of the stream, and lay for hours watching the burning barn. It fascinated him. The curling and shooting flames held him prisoner. A shudder ran through him as the fierce fire broke through the roof and shot far upward into the air, with a hissing sound as of ten thousand serpents. The thick smoke half smothered him, yet he could not tear himself away.

And now the roof fell in, with a surge that sent great volumes of sparks and floating whiffs of blazing hay high into the air. They fell in showers around him. He was no longer concealed. The grove was strongly lit up by the glaring flames.

But the fugitive did not think of that. His mind was taken captive by the splendor of the spectacle before him, and if there had been a hundred men in search of him he could not have stirred.

And there was a feeling of fierce gladness in his mind. Since his revolt against the farmer's brutality he had been full of thoughts of revenge. He could not help a sense of wild satisfaction in the misfortune of his harsh oppressor.

"Serves him right," growled the young savage, between his teeth. "I wouldn't ha' done it myself, but he ought ter git paid fur the way he's whopped and 'bused me."

Gradually the flames went down. The roof and sides of the barn had fallen in, and it was now but a mass of smoldering embers, from which every whiff of wind lifted great flakes of flame.

The rain had begun to fall some time before, and was now pouring down in torrents.

But it was a warm August night, and rain troubled Billy very little. For the first time since the outbreak of the fire was he able to tear his eyes away from it. He crept deeper into the grove, under the partial shelter of a clump of thick bushes. Here exhaustion overcame his senses. He dropped asleep, in spite of the rain.

Two or three hours passed ere the weary lad returned to consciousness. The night was now far spent, but thick darkness yet hung over all things. The rain had ceased, but his clothes were soaking wet.

He rose to his feet and looked toward the barn. He saw a bed of smoldering ashes, lurid with the fire that burned below, while tongues of flame still shot up, from pieces of timber that were yet unburnt.

This reddish light shone on the faces of a group of men in the farm-yard, who were gazing with strange interest on the remnants of the fire. They looked phantom-like in the lurid glare.

Billy's resolution was at once made up. That this fire would be blamed on him he felt sure. Yet he wanted to know more before he took to blind flight. The boy was not a fool. He had been taught by harsh experience.

It was easy now to approach the house. The light from the fire did not extend many yards. A few minutes sufficed to bring him behind a wagon shed, that stood unhurt not far from the barn.

This building was not very tight. Gaping cracks opened between the boards of which it was built. To one of these Billy's eyes were fixed. It gave him a full view of the farm-yard beyond.

He saw a group of a dozen men, standing among the farm implements that had been saved. They seemed engaged in busy conversation. As he looked two of them approached and entered the shed.

They were talking, and every word came to the ears of the fugitive.

"I guess it's no mistake but the boy done it," said one, a heavy-faced farmer.

"I'm afeard so myself," answered a voice, which the listener quickly recognized. It was that of Jake. "Can't say as I'm much surprised 'bout it neither, fur the lad was handled rough. Jerry Wilson ain't fit to have boys under him. I say that."

"But for all that we can't have boys burning our houses about our ears, cause they've had a licking or two."

"You're right there, Mr. Brace. 'Twon't do."

"The ugly-tempered little rascal must be caught and punished. A few years in jail or the House of Refuge will be a good lesson."

"I s'pose so," returned Jake, dubiously. "I kinder liked little Billy. But this sort o' thing is got to be stopped short off."

"He must be taken if the whole country has to be raised. There's talk of telegraphing to the city and warning the police. All the roads must be put under guard. He cannot escape, for every place will be searched. The little rascal is too young in his tricks to hide long."

"He is, hey! Now don't you salt yer mackrel with no sich notions as that. That boy's had no fool of a bringin' up, now, I tell you."

Billy trembled violently. The voice was that of Tim, his old "mas'r." He caught sight of the bloated and brutal face.

"What do you know 'bout him?" demanded Jake.

"More'n you think, mebbe. The little hound were a tramp 'fore he set up as a farmer. And I reckon I know summat 'bout the ways o' tramps. Jist you bet that boy knows a trick or two, and you won't find him hidin' in a milk-pan. Old Wilson's got to put me on the track ef he wants the boy. And he don't git me 'cept he plums out. I saved his hosses fur nothin', and that's enough."

Mr. Brace looked at the seedy speaker.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "That boy's got to be took. I'll join in a reward myself. We've got to make an example of the young barn-burner."

They walked away, still talking.

But Billy had heard enough. He knew his danger now. Tim would be a sleuth-hound on his track, worth a score of the slow-going farmers. The thought of pursuit by his old oppressor was frightful to him. And then the dread of years in jail! The poor little fugitive trembled and grew pale with fear as he ran hastily away from his lurking-place.

For a mile or two he ran blindly onward through the darkness, stumbling over every roughness in the fields, climbing the fences, and at times plunging into some unseen water-course.

Then his senses began to come back to him. The boy had been taken with a panic, but he was no fool, and as soon as his blind fear vanished, he began to think of what he was about.

One thing he quickly observed. On the eastern sky there was a very faint tinge of light. The darkness around him did not seem quite so heavy. He knew well what that meant. Day-break was approaching.

What should he do? Should he continue to fly, in hopes of keeping ahead of the hue and cry? A minute's reflection told him that was useless.

In an hour the sun would be up. In two hours every eye, for miles around, might be on the lookout for him.

Yet one thing came to his sharp brain. It would naturally be supposed that he had been flying through the night, and search would be made for him miles away. Nobody, unless it was Tim, would think of his daring to lurk near at hand.

"I'll do it," said Billy, gritting his teeth with resolution. "They've got to be sharper nor I am 'fore they snatch me, anyhow."

He turned and retraced his steps toward Farmer Wilson's house. As Tim has said, Billy Bubble was no fool.

The darkness was now every minute growing less dense. He made his way across the fields without difficulty. Off to the left, about a mile from the farm-house, was a dense clump of shadow. Toward this the fugitive made his way.

He had not gone far before it opened up as a large piece of woodland, extending over many acres of ground. By the time he reached it the light in the east had grown much stronger, and the dim beginnings of daylight had replaced the midnight darkness.

By this time his rain-soaked clothes had dried. It was a warm August morning. He looked at his chosen place of refuge.

He knew it well. He had been in it twenty times before, and was well acquainted with its conditions. It was largely made up of oak and beech-timber, well grown and thickly filled with underbrush below.

But Billy was well acquainted with the paths that ran through it in various directions, and it was not long before he had penetrated to the center of the wood.

Here he sat down on a fallen log to think. For the present he felt safe. He would indeed have felt safe but for his dread of "Mas'r Tim." He did not fear that any of the countrymen would think of searching a wood so near the house. But Tim was an old bird at this game. He was not secure here a minute from the shrewd tramp. Some other method of safety must be taken.

After half an hour occupied in resting and reflection, Billy rose and began a critical survey of the woods, examining its every covert, noting the size and shape of its trees, and not letting a point escape his sharp eyes.

After awhile he shook his head knowingly, as his eyes rested on a well-grown tree.

"That'll do," he muttered. "Bet high they don't find me, if I ain't nothin' but a bit of a boy. Didn't tramp round all my life 'thout larnin' a thing or two."

He made his way to the side of the wood adjoining the farm. It was now full daylight. One or two persons were visible in the fields. Among them was a form that gave him a start of alarm. It was just leaving the grove where he had spent the previous night, and was approaching his present hiding-place.

He waited until the man came clear enough to make him out plainly.

It was Tim, the tramp.

"Jist as I 'spected," said Billy to himself. "I knowed he'd go fur the home-run fu'st. But he ain't cotched me yit, and he ain't goin' to neither."

He drew back into the wood, and made his way leisurely to the tree he had before observed. He was in no hurry. There was plenty of time.

Reaching here he took off his shoes, tied their strings together and flung them around his neck. Then he advanced to the tree, grasped it with his bare hands and feet, and began to climb.

This was easy work to him. He had selected it before as an easy tree to ascend. A few minutes brought him among the branches.

Here another point in Billy's survey came out. The tree was thick-leaved, and he soon reached a height at which he was completely hidden from below.

Here he found two or three small limbs so grown together as to make a sort of natural arm-chair. Billy seated himself in this improvised covert, and felt very comfortable and happy. For the present he was safe.

Though he was concealed from view he had no difficulty in finding peeping-holes through the screen of leaves to the ground.

He had been sitting here about half an hour when a faint rustling of bushes below came to his sharpened senses. He looked curiously

down. Stealthy steps seemed advancing over the dry twigs.

A moment more and the form of Tim the tramp came into view. He was moving with a slouching gait along the narrow path, his eyes keenly observing every trace of disturbance in the bushes on both sides.

He stopped beneath Billy's tree of refuge, and cast his eyes upward. A tremble of fear ran through the boy's frame. Had he, in spite of his care, left some trace of his movements?

But the next minute reassured him.

"I'd bet a cow he's not many miles away," growled Tim. "And I'm to git a twenty-five-dollar bill if I fetch the rat in. I'd do it anyhow, fur nothin', for I hate the young devil. If he's hidin' in this woods he's my meat."

He moved forward again, with the same watchful care. Billy breathed more freely, while a look of disdain came into his face.

"What'll you bet on that?" he softly demanded. "I'd like to go somethin' big you don't do it."

CHAPTER VIII.

TREED BY A TRAMP.

THE hours went on, but the fugitive did not stir from his hiding-place in the tree. He knew better. The man on his track was not one to be played with. For all he knew Tim might find a body of his fellow tramps, and set them everywhere on the watch.

And Billy had been lucky enough to find a very comfortable seat in the tree. He might have gone to sleep without danger of falling out. And the eyes of a lynx could not have seen him through his screen of leaves.

"Guess I'll stay where I am," he muttered. "Got up here 'thout leavin' no tracks, or else Tim'd been sure to see 'em. And nobody's sure but he'll be back here ag'in 'fore an hour. Don't think I got no bizness down there."

Hour after hour passed. Noon came and went. The little human squirrel stirred uneasily in his nest. The sharp boughs he rested on were not so comfortable as they had been. And he was beginning to feel desperately hungry.

"Wonder if I can't rake up some sort o' grub down below," he queried. "See'd some ripe blackb'ries when I was a-comin'. Reckon it's safe now to go fur 'em."

He roused himself. He felt as stiff as if he had been thrashed. It took him some time to get the blood flowing again in his cramped limbs. He began to slowly crawl along a great branch toward the trunk of the tree.

He had just reached the trunk, and stopped for a minnte to rest, when there came a sound to his ears that gave him a start. It was a sharp crack, as if a rotten twig had broken under a treading foot.

With loudly-beating heart the fugitive clutched the trunk of the tree closely, and waited developments. It might have been a passing rabbit, but it was best to make sure.

Two or three minutes passed, and then he heard what seemed the tread of a stealthy foot. He could not see the ground from where he was,

and waited in deep anxiety for some sign of what was below him.

Now the sound of a hoarse voice came to his ears, in growling accents.

"Drat the young devil!" it uttered. "Whar in ther blazes is he got, anyhow? Ther' ain't a spot as 'd hide a rat 'thin five mile o' here as I ain't s'arched. An' I got Bandy Joe and Big-nose Tom on the hunt, too. Blame his ugly pictur', I've brung him up too sly. The ongrateful young dog got all his eddication from me, an' now he's playin' it ag'in' me. Guess I'll take a rest yere. I'm sorter tired. He can't git away. He's hidin' somewhar round yere, and we'll nab him yit."

The fugitive heard his pursuer fling himself on the grass at the foot of the tree, still growling in a low tone.

Billy trembled in his covert. Only good luck had saved him from being caught. What was he to do? He was now in a very awkward position. Yet he did not dare to crawl back to his former hiding-place, for fear of rousing his vigilant foe by some noise.

He twisted around and laid himself at full length on the limb, encircling it with his arms and legs. He was safe for the present, but his position was very uncomfortable.

As he was now placed he could see the ground through a leaf opening. Directly below him lay the form of his mortal foe. He had stretched himself at full length, with his head on a protruding root, and a lighted pipe in his mouth.

"Mought as well take things comfor'ble," soliloquized Tim, drawing lazily at his pipe. "The boy's a sharp 'un, but I've got my net set. He's bound to fall inter it."

He sent up a great puff of smoke.

"Don't know but I was a blazin' fool to ever let the kid go," continued Tim. "Ther's money in him, plenty on't, if I could on'y catch that 'oman as got me to snatch 'im. I jist got kinder disgusted, and kicked ther lazy young rat away. Got tired o' findin' him grub, but fur all that I'd like ter keep him in tow. If I kin land him in jail now, fur three or four years, fur burnin' that barn, I'd know whar to find 'im, ef the 'oman turns up."

Billy listened very intently to these words. He knew they referred to some mystery in his past life, and he hoped to learn more of it. Tim, supposing himself alone, might let out the whole secret.

But Tim had no idea of doing anything of the kind. He subsided into silence, and smoked away for ten minutes without another word.

Billy was in despair. His hopes of learning the mystery of his birth were wrecked. And his position on the limb was growing more difficult to maintain. He was afraid he might grow so weary as to drop off, into the very hands of his enemy.

He was seriously debating whether he had not best take the risk of crawling out the limb to his former hiding-place, when Tim took the pipe from his mouth, shook the ashes from it, and began again to speak.

"Got a notion as how that 'oman's somewhar round these diggin's. Her and her man levanted from Frisco a good six year ago and

come East. Dunno the man's name and can't find nobody with hern. But I've got her order ter snatch the brat. You bet I keep that safe, in a nice little envelope."

He thrust his hand into some inner pocket and drew out a dingy envelope, which he eyed with great satisfaction.

"Won't I squeeze my lady when I catch her? Not much, mebbe. But if she don't fork out lively I'll make these yere diggin's hot fur her. Don't I know her man's rich? He'd guv gobs o' money fur the boy. And if she wants Tim Buster ter keep mum on her little game she's got ter shell out like sin. I ain't goin' to be vartuous 'thout I'm paid for't."

He broke into a hoarse laugh as he lay back on his hard bed.

Minutes passed away. All grew silent. Billy retained his uncomfortable position in the tree. The guard below lay in dead quiet, still holding the important paper in his hand. On this the boy's eyes were fixed with covetous desire. It might contain the mystery of his former life.

The minutes lengthened themselves into an hour. Now a sound like a faint snore came from the recumbent man. It increased until he was loudly snoring. What the boy had hoped for had happened. His dangerous foe was fast asleep.

What was to be done? It was impossible to remain longer where he was. His limbs felt like dead sticks. Should he crawl back to his old covert, and remain there till the coast was clear? But that paper in the tramp's hand! It drew Billy as a magnet draws the iron.

He changed his position and made an effort to get back the circulation into his deadened limbs. It was full ten minutes before his arms felt like living things again. Then he began slowly to descend the tree.

Inch by inch he went with the greatest caution. He well knew that a very slight sound might waken his light-sleeping enemy. From limb to limb he carefully slipped, until he reached the last just over the sleeping tramp.

Billy drew back, clutching the tree-trunk in terror as Tim changed his position with a low groan. He remained thus crouching for several minutes. The sleeper began to snore again. All was yet safe.

Two minutes more, and the bare feet of the fugitive touched the ground on the side of the tree opposite the sleeper. He gazed cautiously round. There lay his dangerous foe within reach of his hand, yet utterly unconscious of what was going on so near him.

Billy noticed one thing with hopeful eyes. In turning over Tim's tight clutch on the paper had been loosened. It now lay loosely between his fingers.

He determined to try and obtain it, at any risk.

Stretching himself noiselessly on the ground he began to creep forward inch by inch, removing every twig or leaf that might have cracked or rustled under his weight.

Inch by inch. He was within a foot of his foe. He could feel the fetid breath of the intemperate tramp. The boy shuddered with fear,

yet he set his teeth with firm resolution as he dragged himself slowly forward. No Indian scout could have advanced more noiselessly.

And now the hand that held the coveted paper was within his reach.

Hushing his breath, lest even that might waken the sleeper, he extended his hand, and caught the corner of the paper between his finger and thumb.

He pulled on it with a slight pressure. It slipped through the loosened fingers of the tramp. A minute of this slow movement, and it was fairly in Billy's possession.

A feeling of triumph filled his soul. He gave an involuntary movement that seemed to disturb the alert senses of the tramp. Tim stirred uneasily, and partly turned.

Billy, full of deadly fear, lay as if he was dead. He did not even breathe. A full minute passed. The danger was over. The sleeper had sunk into rest again.

The young scout began to withdraw as cautiously as he had advanced. He moved backward, over the same route, until he had once more put the tree-trunk between himself and his dreaded foe.

He now cautiously rose to his feet, his heart beating high with triumph. Consigning to his pocket the valuable prize he had captured, he moved carefully away, his bare feet falling noiselessly on the grass.

Along the path he moved, taking the utmost care to prevent any rustle in the overhanging bushes, and to tread on nothing that could give a sound.

And still Tim slept on, utterly unconscious of the events that had taken place round him. Would he miss the paper when he woke, or forget that he had taken it from his pocket?

Billy's caution ceased after he had put a safe distance between himself and his foe. He could hardly, indeed, repress a shout of triumph to think how he had fooled his shrewd enemy.

As for his prize it was time enough to examine that. To hunt something to eat was his first desire.

He was not long in finding the blackberry bushes. They hung full of fruit, partly green and partly ripe. Putting on his shoes to save his feet from the briers, the hungry boy went eagerly to work.

For a half-hour he continued to gather and eat the hard wild berries, until his appetite was satisfied.

Then he paused to think what was to be done next. It would not do to leave the woods by daylight. And there was no telling how soon Tim might waken, miss his paper, and resume his search.

He saw but one safe course. He must take to a tree again.

He was not long in finding a suitable one. Approaching it cautiously, so as to leave no trace of his passage, he climbed to the limbs, and hid himself among the leaves and boughs.

Hours passed away. Night approached. Yet no living being came near the boy's new hiding-place.

Yet not until the shadows of the night began to gather did the fugitive descend. He was wise

enough to know that too much is better than too little care.

He made his way to the edge of the wood. All was quiet. The evening gloom was gathering. Yet the sky had cleared. The night would not be so dark as the previous one had been.

But not until full night had fallen did the young fugitive leave the shelter of the woods. Then he stole out under the starlight, and began his retreat across the fields.

Carefully avoiding the roads and houses, he made his way, mile after mile, across fields, climbing an endless number of fences. By the time morning began to dawn, he was more than ten miles away from his late hiding-place.

He was dreadfully tired. Near him was a close thicket. He made his way into it by a narrow path. Reaching its center he crept into the heart of a dense screen of bramble-bush, and lay down at full length, as safe as a rabbit in covert.

In ten minutes he was fast asleep. High noon had passed when he awoke. Helay and listened. There was not a sound to be heard except the rustle of the wind in the bushes, and the notes of some hopping birds.

Billy crept out of his nest, and went on the hunt for something to eat. There were no blackberries here, and he found nothing but some red hawberries, and a bed of mushrooms around an old stump.

Making a slender dinner off these, he returned to his hiding-place. Here he lay for several hours, listening to the birds, and laughing at the idea of pursuit.

After a while sleep again overtook him, and it was near night when he again awoke. But with undiminished caution, he took care not to leave the thicket until full night had fallen.

That night he made his way to the close vicinity of the city. He could see its lights in the distance hours before he reached it. The first streaks of dawn found him on the bank of a narrow river that bounded the city on that side. Just beyond it the dark array of buildings arose.

Billy had not forgotten what he had heard in the shed. The police would be on the lookout, and every road to the city would be watched.

"There's one road as ain't watched," said the boy, looking at the dark-flowing stream.

He could swim like a fish. What cared he for roads or bridges? If he attempted to cross the bridge, the watchman might nab him. But the water had no watchman.

Into the stream he plunged, and bravely battled its flowing current. Ten minutes of strong swimming landed him safely on the other side. He climbed up to the wharf, saw an open shed at its upper end, and flung himself down behind a heap of broken stone. In five minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY BUBBLE IN NEW QUARTERS.

"Hi!" What sort of a 'possum have we got here? Whistle up that dog, somebody, and we'll have a hunt."

It was about ten o'clock in the morning. The sun was shining brightly. This cry was made by a rough-faced laborer, who had just had business at the wharf shed, and had discovered Billy Bubble fast asleep behind this heap of stones.

"What have you got there, Tom?" cried a second laborer, running up.

Several others stopped their work, and looked into the shed.

"A sleepin' possum. Whistle up the terrier, and let's have some fun."

A shrill whistle brought up a shaggy dog, with bristling ears and teeth. This the men clapped onto the sleeping boy. The terrier sprung forward, with short, crisp barks. He caught the boy's loose sleeve, and jerked it fiercely with his teeth, before Billy awoke.

The little vagrant looked up in wonder and alarm. When he went to sleep all was deathly still, and the shadows of night brooded over the scene.

Now the sunbeams poured hotly into the shed, a half-dozen rough, coarse men were looking down on him with brutal laughter, and an angry terrier was worrying his sleeve.

Billy sprung hastily to his feet, with a cry of alarm. He looked with scared eyes to right and left, eager to run, but the men closed up every avenue of escape. And the dog sprung at him again, fiercely barking.

He kicked at the snarling brute, but he might as well have kicked at a weasel. The dog leaped away, and then sprung at his leg, with a sharp snap of his white teeth. In desperation the boy picked up a double handful of the finely-broken stone, and dashed it down on the head and eyes of the dog.

This was more than the terrier had bargained for. He ran away with a wild yelp of dismay.

The laughing men advanced.

"Let's drop the little rat overboard, and see how he can swim."

"Sink him in the tar-kettle. We'll make a blacky of him."

"Fetch up that swab, Tom. We'll slather him down."

Full of their heartless lark they advanced on Billy, with swabs and brooms. The boy, sadly frightened, retreated step by step into a corner, where he stood with dilated eyes. One of the men was already punching at him with a swab covered with hot tar.

He crouched into the corner. Not a word came from his lips. They might do what they pleased, but they would not make him beg for mercy.

Still they advanced, laughing and hooting, and making rude pokes at him with their implements. One coarse chap thrust a swab filled with hot tar in his face.

This was more than Billy could stand. In a fit of ungovernable rage he leaped forward, caught the man's hand in his mouth and sunk his teeth in the flesh till they grated against the bone.

The man yelled with pain, and kicked fiercely at his young antagonist.

"What does all this mean?" cried a stern,

sharp voice from the wharf. "What are you men after?"

Most of the men changed countenance and sneaked back to their work at these words. But the burly fellow who had felt the boy's teeth knocked him down in an impulse of rage. He had raised his foot to give him a brutal kick, when the speaker sprung forward.

"Don't you dare touch that boy!" he sternly exclaimed. "Go to your work. Or go to the office for your pay. I don't care which."

The man turned away, muttering fiercely. He showed his bleeding hand to the gentleman who had spoken.

This was a tall, well-dressed, fine-formed personage, of some forty years of age. His face was kindly, though just now it wore a very stern look.

"Mercy! did he bite you that way? Why, he's a wharf-rat in earnest. What do you mean by such behavior?" he demanded of Billy, who had regained his feet.

"They began it," answered the boy, surlily. "I weren't doin' nothin' but sleepin', and they come and set the dog on me. An' they slathered me with tar. Jist look."

He showed his blackened face and clothes.

"That big 'un slashed all this tar in my face. And then I got mad and bit him. And I'd like to bite him ag'in, too."

The boy's tone was full of indignation. His face was so covered with the sticky compound that only his eyes were visible.

The gentleman's face grew indignant. He turned and spoke with harsh anger to his men, threatening to discharge the whole of them if such a thing should occur again.

"He served you right, Thompson. Go get your hand dressed, and try and act more like a man in future. You, Bill, take the boy and clean him up. Then bring him to me."

He retired to his office, a neat brick building at the head of the wharf. The men returned to their work, which seemed to be that of preparing material for gravel roofing. Billy was led away for rejuvenation.

When the man who had him in charge brought him to the office, after cleaning him up as well as possible, the boy's countenance was clear and shining, though his clothes were sadly soiled with the tar.

"That's about the best I could do, Mr. Gordon. They slushed the hot stuff into him with their swabs."

"That will do. You can go. Come here, little one, and let me look at you."

Billy quietly obeyed. The gentleman fixed his shrewd eyes on the lad's intelligent face. He continued to look at him until Billy fell back abashed.

"You look bright," said Mr. Gordon, quietly. "What can you do?"

"Not much of anything," answered Billy. "I don't know nothin' much save trampin', and a bit 'bout farmin'."

"Ah! A country boy. So much the better if you don't know the tricks of the town. What is your name?"

"Billy Bubble."

"Well, that's an odd one," rejoined Mr. Gor-

don, with a laugh. "You look like a solid bubble. I want a boy about your size, Billy, and since my men have treated you so badly I'd like to repay you. Can I trust your honesty?"

"I never stoled nothin' yit," broke out the boy, passionately. "And I never intend to, neither."

Mr. Gordon looked at him. His tone had the accent of truth. And there was something very frank and engaging in his face.

Some more questions followed. Fortunately he asked Billy very little about his past life. The boy was inwardly quaking lest some hint of his recent adventures might come out.

But Mr. Gordon did not press him on this point of his history.

"I want you in my house," he said. "To do little jobs, and to wait on the door, and to run errands occasionally. Do you think you would like that?"

"First rate," declared Billy, warmly, "if I kin do it."

"I have no fears on that score."

"Then I'm ever so much 'bliged, Mr. Gordon," he gratefully responded. "And I'm jist ready to go to work right off. I'm little, but I'm strong."

"Heigho! but this isn't business. You are not going to take a position without making a bargain?"

"I s'pose I'll git grub. That's 'bout all I keer fur. Ain't had none too much o' that, so fur."

Mr. Gordon laughed. Yet his eyes rested very kindly on his new *protégé*.

"You seem to have had a hard life of it," he said. "I may be taking a risk in engaging you. But there's something about you draws me, my boy. I don't know what it is, but I feel as if I want you near me. You will get enough to eat at any rate. And I think I can afford to pay you a dollar a week besides. Will that suit?"

"You bet it will."

"But your clothes will never do. Those rascals have ruined them. I owe you a new suit. Just wait, Billy. Take a seat there on the bench. I will see what I can do when I get through here."

Billy did as directed. In a little while he had fallen over fast asleep. He had not yet recovered from his weariness.

It was several hours before Mr. Gordon was ready to go out. He stood looking at the sleeping boy for some time before waking him.

"I don't know what it is. There is something about the boy." He shook his head doubtfully. "Is it that his face reminds me of my own poor little fellow? If he were alive yet he would look like this lad. He had the same bright eyes and clear-cut face."

He woke Billy after a while employed in observing him.

"Come, youngster. Now let's see if we can't rig you out."

Billy sprung up brisk as a lark.

Mr. Gordon led the lad to a clothing store, where he quickly rigged him out in a neat-fitting suit, from hat to shoes. It produced a remarkable change in the boy's aspect. He had never been half so well-dressed before, and he looked like a little gentleman.

Mr. Gordon regarded him with satisfaction.

"Here's a transformation," he remarked. "I thought a little newness would polish you up, my boy. Now let's toddle to the house. I want to introduce you to your new duties."

That very afternoon the boy entered upon his task. He proved an apt scholar, and under the tutelage of the mistress of the kitchen was soon broken into the traces.

His work was mainly to wait on the door, to wash pavements, to do odd jobs about the kitchen, and to run occasional errands.

This last was the only part of his work that Billy dreaded. He feared that he was still hunted for by his foes, and that he might at any minute be arrested and clapped into jail to answer the charge of barn-burning.

But as days went by, and he continued safe, he regained some confidence.

At Mr. Gordon's house his position was not altogether a sinecure. He had plenty to eat, and had quickly got on the right side of the kitchen girls, particularly the cook.

But Mrs. Gordon was not an easy mistress, and she kept the boy on the go, from morning to night. He was left hardly an idle minute.

He would not have cared much for this, however, if she had treated him kindly. She was harsh and querulous, and very severe at the slightest sign of Billy's besetting sin of carelessness.

Mr. Gordon continued kind, but he seemed somewhat afraid of his termagant wife. There came frequently a sad look on his face as if life had not been very bright to him.

"Don't wonder much at that," said Billy to himself. "Never see'd anybody quite up to Mrs. Gordon. She don't guv nobody no peace."

But Mrs. Gordon was only one of his troubles. He had another that was still harder to bear. This was Mrs. Gordon's son, a boy about two years younger than himself, and the most spiteful, ugly-tempered little wretch conceivable.

He seemed to have taken a spite against Billy, and took every opportunity to annoy him.

In fact he made himself a regular spy, watching Billy's every movement, noticing every dereliction, and reporting to his mother. Between the two the boy's life was not an easy one.

"I'd like to wring the little rascal's neck," he confided to his friend, the cook. "He'd bite and pinch me, only he's afeard of his daddy. He's wuss than one o' them snappin' dogs."

"I'd like to roll him up in flour and bake him intill a pie," answered Bridget. "He jist makes the house unbearable."

There was one thing more troubled Billy. This was the mysterious document he had captured from the tramp.

His education had been so neglected that he was quite unable to read writing. The somewhat soiled paper was covered with ink marks that were so many hieroglyphics to him.

Bridget, to whom he showed it, could make no more of it than himself. Her education was not remarkable for its breadth.

"I kin fairly read me own name," she declared. "But it's little sense I kin make of anything beyant it. Why don't ye show the bit o' writin' to Mr. Gordon? Sure he'll tell you what it m'anes in a jiffy."

"I didn't like to bother him," answered Billy. "But I reckon he wouldn't mind. 'Twouldn't take him long."

"Take him long, is it? Why, he'd do it while a fly was flirtin' its wing."

"He's a nice man, Bridget."

"Faith an' he's the whole o' that. It's a cryin' pity he's had so sorry a life of it."

"He looks sad."

"Indade an' he has r'ason. Come till me some time when I've got me hands out o' the suds, and I'll tell ye all about it."

CHAPTER X.

ALL ABOUT A PIECE OF PAPER.

THOUGH Billy Bubble had so far kept out of the hands of his foes they had by no means given up the pursuit. Too much depended on his capture to his three principal pursuers for them to easily give over the chase.

The reward offered had set all the country people and the city police on the lookout. But after several days had passed without a trace of the fugitive their vigilance relaxed.

This was not the case with Jonas Stark and Jerry Wilson. They saw cash ahead in the capture of the boy. Could they find his parents they counted on a heavy reward.

As for Tim Buster, the tramp, he had a special reason for hunting the fugitive. He had missed the document on which he set such store, and could not be convinced but that Billy had captured it.

"Needn't be pokin' no taffy at me," he growled. "'Tweren't no bird nor no squirrel as went through me when I were snoozin' in the woods. It were that cantankerous boy."

"How can you know if you didn't see him?" queried Jonas. "You may have lost the paper."

"Nary time. Billy Bubble got it. Why, bless my jolly eyes, I went ter sleep squosh under ther very tree whar he was roostin'. Found it out arterwards, when I came to and missed the paper. I see'd the scratches on the bark, where he'd clumb the tree."

"He fooled you neatly, if that was the case. But where is he now?"

"Don't ax me. He's a keen little rat. He alders was a keen 'un. But he's playin' with the wrong coon. I'll snatch him yit, you bet. I'm bound to have that paper back."

"What was the paper?"

"That's my biz."

"See here, Tim Buster, as I believe you call yourself," said Jonas, sharply. "You know a good deal more about this boy than you care to let on. It was a tramp he calls Master Tim had him in tow before he came to Mr. Wilson. And you are that man. I know it."

"Then if you've got it settled that fine, ther's no use in me sayin' nothin'," answered Tim, sulkily. "Jist you keep on knowin' it."

"We know more than that," exclaimed Jerry Wilson. "Shall I speak plainly, Mr. Stark?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, we know that the boy is no tramp's son. He is the child of rich parents. He was stolen in his youth. And you are the kidnapper."

Tim's face changed color at this accusation.

"It's a lie," he answered hoarsely. "If it ain't jist you prove it. I ain't goin' to stay here to be'sulted by nobody. And arter savin' your hosses too."

"It's no lie," rejoined Jonas, fixing the tramp with his sharp eyes. "See here, my man, we have no designs against you, but we are bound to find that boy's father. I know who the father is. I can tell you his name if you wish. I know he is rich, and will pay well for the recovery of the boy. But I don't know where he is. There I trust to you. Put us on his track, and we will share the reward."

Tim looked at him dubiously. Was this a sell to get him into trouble?

"Don't be afraid to speak," broke in the farmer. "The little rascal burnt my barn, and I've got to get the value of it out of him. First of all we want the boy. If we can clap him in jail we have him safe. Then to find the father and see how he will bleed is the next point."

"You know the daddy?" cried Tim, suddenly. "Who is he?"

"His name is Henry Johnson. Twelve years ago he was a rich merchant in San Francisco. His boy, three years old, was stolen from him. And you were the child-stealer."

"Tain't so," exclaimed Tim. "I never stoled no man's brat. The youngster was sold to me by a woman. I never seen the daddy. She guv me a paper, with her name to it, as she'd pay so much a year fur his keep. So she did, fur ten years, or thereabout. Then she dropped. I've been a-huntin' her since, but she's guv me the dish."

"She gave you a paper signed by her name?" cried Jonas. "Was it Johnson?"

"No. It were Brown."

"And is that the paper you lost yesterday?"

"It am. You've got it thar."

"This is getting to be a very curious and complicated affair," admitted Jonas. "It is odd if the boy has taken from you the order for his own abduction. And who was this woman, Brown? What relation did she bear to Henry Johnson? What had she to gain from the abduction of the boy? I must learn all this. I will write to the police authorities in San Francisco and have the matter looked up. We must know on what ground we stand."

"And we must get hold of the boy," rejoined Jerry, with a frown. "I want to give the rascal a pinch for setting fire to my barn."

"We'll snatch him 'fore long," said Tim, confidently. "He's somewhar in ther city. I'll go a cow on that. And I'm goin' on a sneak fur him."

"I'll back you in that," remarked Jonas. "You can take the lower level of life and I'll take the higher. He can't escape us."

And so it was arranged between the three conspirators. Billy Bubble would have to be wide awake to escape the trap laid for him. Jonas Stark and Tim Buster were a brace of keen-nosed sleuth-hounds on his track.

We must return to Billy, and his life in his new home. It had gone smoothly so far, but there were breakers ahead. The fates were piling up trouble for him in an unexpected quarter.

In fact Mrs. Gordon seemed to have taken a strong dislike to her new servant. And she took every means to let him feel it.

She was a tall, finely-formed, handsome woman, with keen black eyes, and those thin lips that indicate temper. And she could be a regular fury if she chose. She was always nagging, driving, and scolding, until the boy's life became almost unbearable.

And she encouraged the spiteful disposition and spying habits of her son, until Billy felt more than once inclined to wring the neck of the little wretch.

He did not like to complain to Mr. Gordon. This gentleman had been very kind to him, and Billy was shrewd enough to see that his home life was anything but a happy one. He had very little comfort out of either wife or son, and his wealth was no cure for the sorrow that shadowed his fine face.

"I'd run away from here like I did from the farm, only I don't want to go ag'in' Mr. Gordon," said Billy to himself. "He's be'n so good to me."

Several days after the conversation with Bridget, as recorded in the last chapter, Billy, having a short space of rest, had seated himself in the rear hall, and drawn from his pocket the paper he had captured from Tim.

He had found no opportunity yet to show it to Mr. Gordon, and he sat here intently studying its mysterious characters, and wondering what they could mean.

As he did so little John Gordon stole into the hall, and seeing Billy so intently engaged slipped on tip-toes toward him, hoping to find him out in some fault which he could report to his mother.

He crept up behind Billy and looked covertly over his shoulder, his spiteful eyes full of hope of catching the hired boy engaged in some forbidden pleasure.

To the surprise and disappointment of the young spy his intended victim had nothing but a strip of writing paper, on which was written something which he seemed to be trying to read.

But the next minute the eyes of the spy blazed out with satisfaction. He stole his hand slyly round, and snatched the paper from Billy's grasp.

"I've caught you now! I've caught you now!" he cried, in malicious glee. "That's mamma's writing. You've stolen that paper from her room. Ah! won't you catch it! I'm going right away to tell her."

Billy sprung from his seat in a rage.

"Give it back to me! It isn't your mother's writin'."

"Guess I know mamma's writing. There isn't anybody writes like her. You stole it. You stole it. Just wait till she sees it."

He danced in his spiteful glee at having caught the hired boy in a serious fault.

All this was more than Billy's temper could stand. His wrath against the little petted and spoiled wretch had been growing day by day, and now culminated.

He sprung at him fiercely, and caught him by the arm.

"Give it back, or you'll catch a lickin'."

"I won't. You let go of me or I'll tell my mamma."

Billy snatched at the paper, but the boy held it out at the length of his arm, tightly clutching it.

In an ungovernable rage the hired boy flung his arms round his younger antagonist, hurled him to the floor, and rolled and mauled him until he yelled like a stuck pig.

"I'll larn you to watch and pick at a feller," cried Billy, in a fury. "I'll give you somethin' to tell your nice mammy, you nasty little spy. I'll pay you up fur snatchin' things out o' my hand."

He mauled and hammered him until his clothes were covered with dust, and half torn from his body, while the blood flowed profusely from his nose.

In the fight both parties had forgotten the bone of contention. The stolen paper had slipped from John's hand and been blown by the wind of the combat to a darker corner of the hall, where it lay against the subbase.

This affair could not continue much longer. The shrill screams of the younger lad rung through every portion of the house. Simultaneously Mrs. Gordon appeared on the stairs, running hastily down, and Bridget came with equal haste from the kitchen.

Billy, heedless of these reinforcements, and his rage still at boiling point, continued to pound and roll his antagonist.

"I'll larn you to spy and snatch, you little mud-turtle! I'll show you if Billy Bubble's a rag baby, fur you to play with."

At this moment Bridget caught the infuriated boy by the shoulders, and lifted him bodily, in her strong arms, from his victim.

"What do you m'an'e anyhow, you spalpeen?" she angrily demanded. "This is n'ate behavior now, isn't it, avick?"

At the same moment Mrs. Gordon ran up, with a wild swish of her garments, and caught her screaming son from the floor.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she cried in a violent passion. "Has he killed you, my son? Are you much hurt? Ah! the murderous wretch! Let me have him, Bridget! He has tried to kill my son!"

She snatched Billy in a torrent of passion from Bridget's hands, and shook and beat him with a force that only fury could have lent her. The boy squirmed and resisted, but he was as nothing in her strong grasp.

The screaming youngster recovered his courage on seeing his foe in his mother's hands, and sprung spitefully forward, clawing with his sharp nails at Billy's face.

This was too much for flesh and blood to stand. The assailed boy gave a quick squirm and stoop, and broke loose from the grasp that held him. Then he darted forward, lifted his foot, and planted it squarely in John's stomach, doubling him up like a jack-knife.

The next instant Billy made a break for the door, closely followed by the mother, whose face had the expression of a fury.

Tearing open the door the fugitive sprung to the steps and from there to the street, running for dear life. Mrs. Gordon ceased her pursuit on the steps, where she broke into a torrent of

vituperation that seemed utterly out of place in a high-born lady.

There was one thing neither of them noticed. On the opposite side of the street slouched Tim the tramp.

His eyes lighted up on perceiving the boy, and he made a hasty movement to follow him. But this idea was checked when his eyes fell on the face of the woman at the door. He stood as if he had been petrified, gazing at her with a stare of astonishment. It was not until she had withdrawn into the house that he seemed to recover his senses.

"My eyes!" he said, "but this is gorgeous. I've a notion to go squar' off and git drunk on the strength of't. Blame me if I ain't."

A half-hour afterward Mr. Gordon entered the house. By that time the passion of its inmates had somewhat cooled down, and they were able to tell him with some calmness of what had happened.

He listened in silence, though with a compressed lip.

"And all this was about a piece of paper, which John accused the boy of stealing from your room," he remarked, sarcastically. "Where is that piece of paper?"

"What do I know about it?" answered his wife, in a high tone. "I suppose the murderous young villain, whom you introduced into my house to assail my son, took it away with him. I shall have him arrested and punished for the theft."

"No he didn't take it," declared John, triumphantly. "I held on to it. It got out of my hand, and I guess it's in the hall yet."

Mr. Gordon walked down to investigate.

The boy had told the truth. There lay the paper against the wall. The gentleman picked it up and cast his eyes on it with some curiosity.

What was it that stung him as if he had been bitten by a rattlesnake? His eyes opened wide, his jaw fell, a sound like a hollow groan came from his white lips. He staggered back and sunk into a chair, pressing his two hands on his deathly-pale face.

A fatal poison seemed to have flown into his veins from that innocent slip of white paper which he clutched so firmly in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE HORNET'S NEST.

MEANWHILE the fugitive boy was making the best of his way through the streets of the city, heedless of the trouble he had left behind him. His quick eyes had caught sight of Tim, the tramp, and he was too full of terror to think of anything but escape.

Billy did not stop till he had left the city behind him. When he recovered from his panic it was to find himself on a dusty country road, that seemed to run straight on for miles.

He stopped and looked back in some doubt as to what was best.

"Somehow I wish I was dead," he muttered, as he leaned in misery against the fence. "It's a big world, I s'pose, but it don't seem ter have no room fur me."

He stretched himself at full length on the roadside, with his face in the grass, and re-

mained lost in unhappy thought, heedless of the hot sun that poured its rays upon him.

Carriages, wagons, and foot passengers went by, but no one disturbed the disconsolate boy, who seemed simply taking a roadside snooze.

Finally there came along another wagon, a crazy vehicle, that groaned in every joint as it dragged lazily onward.

It was drawn by a horse that might have passed for a skeleton only that a dried-up skin was still stretched over its bones. The poor creature came shambling along, the wagon rattled and groaned behind it, and following it again there came two figures that had probably been got up for human beings, but had been decided failures.

They were a pair of blear-eyed, rusty skinned wretches, dressed in castaway rags, and looking as ancient and as dirty as if they had been buried in the mud of the Deluge, and but lately dug up.

They came opposite the boy and looked down on him.

"W'oa, there!" growled one of them to the horse.

This was an order that the miserable brute never failed to obey.

"Ther kid's drapped off," said one.

"Snoozin'," remarked the other.

"Got store duds on. Let's skin 'im."

"Slide yer forks in his pockets. He mought have shiners."

The miserable wretches, who would not have hesitated long to strip the boy and fling his body into the nearest ditch, bent over him covetously. Billy, who had fallen asleep, was aroused by their voices, and turned hastily and looked up.

A cry of terror came from his lips, as he scrambled in wild haste to his feet.

"Bandy Joe and Big-Nose Tom!" he ejaculated, in a panic of fear.

"Hello! What sort of a ginger-pop is this? Twigs us, by gum! Snap the kid, Joe. Less quiz his eyewinkers."

Joe had not waited for this command. He seized Billy by the collar as he rose, and jerked his head round, so that he could see his face.

"My stars!" he cried, slapping his knee.

"Twig him?"

"You bet, it's that blarsted little slip-trip of a Billy Bubble, as guv Tim the go-by, and as is been playin' spectable."

"And as Tim's ter guv us a jolly fiver if we snatch him?"

"Jiss so."

Billy, by this time, was wild with terror. He knew the men into whose hands he had fallen, and that he could not hope for any mercy at their hands.

He looked eagerly up and down the road for help, but there was not a person in sight.

At this moment he caught a glimpse of a familiar face in the wagon. A woman who had been lying asleep in its bottom had awakened with the talk, and had just crawled to the tail-board to look out.

The face was red, swollen, coarse, yet not unkindly.

"Missus!" screamed Billy, in sudden hope. "It's me! It's little Billy! Don't let 'em hurt me! Oh, don't let 'em!"

"Billy Bubble?" she answered, in surprise: "My stars, where forever did you come from? Fetch him yere, you chaps."

"He's our meat, Mother Buster. Tim told us ter snatch 'im."

"Well, ain't ye snatched him? S'pose I'm goin' ter swaller him? Fotch him yere, and pile him in. He won't run away from his old mammy."

One of the tramps picked up the trembling boy as if he had been a feather and tossed him into the wagon.

Despite her long connection with a gang of brutal tramps there was a touch of womanly kindness in Mrs. Buster that nothing could quite kill out. She had been the friend of the helpless boy in his younger days, and had saved him from much harsh treatment. The reappearance of her old *protégé* had roused all the maternal instincts of her heart, and she inwardly resolved that Tim should not ill-treat the boy, whatever else happened.

As they jogged slowly on, the tramps slouching like a rear guard behind the wagon that held their prisoner, her kindly voice and the touch of her soothing hand gradually dispelled the boy's fears, and some of his vanished spirit came back to him.

"Now, where's you been, Billy, I want ter now?" she demanded. "Tell me all 'bout it. Hy, ye're trigged out like a reg'lar little gentleman. Where'd ye git all that toggery?"

Thus requested Billy gradually told his story, it by bit, from the time he had been deserted in the road by Tim until the present time.

"Sure, ye didn't start the blink in that barn yerself, Billy? 'Twasn't no more nor that old farmer desarved."

"'Twasn't me," said Billy, earnestly. "There were a tramp in the barn a-smokin'."

"Who was that tramp?"

"You teached me long ago never to say no names," protested the boy.

"Good fur you. That's right. Anyhow, I know all 'bout it. Tim bragged how he saved the hosses, drat him! That's how, is it? Oughter saved 'em when he scorched 'em."

Billy went on with his story, in response to her questions, until he reached the account of his life in Mr. Gordon's house and the cause of his flight.

She listened intently to this part of the narrative, a muttered word occasionally falling from her lips. The tale had evidently set her thinking.

"An' they're goin' to clap ye in jail for barn-burnin', be they? Wish I could let ye slide, but 'tain't to be did. Tim'd kill me. I'm 'feard he'll be wrothy 'bout that paper. But he sha'n't hurt you. Drap over in the straw and take a snooze, Billy. 'Tain't worth while to borry trouble, afore it comes."

Billy, who was pretty thoroughly worn out, did not delay long in obeying her request, and was soon fast asleep in the straw in the bottom of the wagon.

When Billy returned to his senses it was to find himself being punched at by a rough hand.

"Come, stir up, youngster. Open your winkers and paddle yer trotters. Ain't none o' the Seven Sleepers, be ye?"

The wagon lay in the corner of a piece of woods, where the horse, released from his fetters, was eagerly cropping the grass. Through the leaves the glitter of stars could be seen. At one side of the space burnt a fire of twigs, over which Mother Buster was busily engaged in cooking duties. The two tramps lay on the grass, smoking their short pipes.

Who was it, then, that had aroused the sleeping boy? Billy did not need to be told that. His terror returned as he recognized the voice of Tim, and felt his heavy hand.

"Nice runaway, ain't ye now?" demanded Tim, with a hoarse laugh. "Thought ye'd guv me toe bail, did ye? Didn't know ye was scootin' from the hornet ter plump inter the hornet's nest, hey? Ye're a neat little duck, ain't ye? Chip out now, lively."

Billy slipped out of the tail of the wagon, without an answer.

Tim caught him by the shoulder as he reached the ground, and slewed him round till he faced the fire.

"Le's squint at yer jolly phiz," he remarked. "A pretty little swab he is, I'll swoow! Jiss as spruce as a lord. Think we've got any perwisions good enough fur the gay little bloke, mammy?"

"Guess so," answered the woman, huskily.

"Guv him some rat-tail soup, and grasshoppers' hind legs. Ain't nothin' else'll suit him, I know. Now flunk over to yer mommy, youngster. And mind yer eye that ye don't try ter git up and git. If ye want ter be salted down like a pickled herrin' jist try it on, that's all."

He flung himself on the grass beside his two associates, and entered into a confab with them, seemingly paying no more attention to his little prisoner. He was well satisfied that the boy would not dare to take to flight.

Billy walked over toward the fire. His confidence was slowly returning. He had had such a fright that it was not easy to get over it, and he was well aware that Tim's present good humor was but the velvety covering to the tiger's claws.

In half an hour the supper was ready, and the party gathered around their table, consisting of a rough cloth spread on the grass. Ten minutes sufficed, in their brute-like way of eating, to clear away the provender to the last morsel.

The woodland meal over, Tim rose, stretched himself, and then turned to Billy, with a harsh frown.

"Come here!" he ordered, sternly.

The boy looked as if he would like to refuse, but he did not dare to. He moved slowly upward, with an appealing look.

"Stir yer lazy stumps."

He reached out his long arm, and caught Billy by the collar.

"Now, you young thief, do you know what you deserve?"

"A whoppin', I s'pose," said Billy, desperately.

"Hear him?" cried Tim, with a hoarse laugh. "He knows what's a-comin'. Ye're a little Sunday-school dumplin', you are, as robs folks in the woods when they's asleep. Hand over that there paper now, or I'll pile you on that fire. D'ye hear?"

"I ain't got it. I lost it."

"You lie, you rat."

"I never tell no lies."

Tim looked at him sourly.

"By the Jiminy crickets, I'll find out," he roared. "Off with your jacket."

Billy obeyed. Jim thoroughly searched it. He made a similar search of his prisoner's other clothes, but without a shadow of success.

"What's this you got round your neck?" he cried.

"Oh, don't take that!" pleaded the boy pitifully. "That ain't the paper!"

"What is it, I say?"

He snatched at the cord and drew up the miniature picture on which Billy set such store. The ruffian looked at it for a minute with a greatly surprised countenance.

"Whar did you git this?"

"It's mine! Don't take it!"

"You stole it, blast you! I know who it belongs to, and I'm goin' fur the reward."

"Oh, Mas'r Tim!" cried Billy, falling back into his old style of speech. "Oh, give it to me, and you can whop me, and do anything with me!"

"Give it to the boy!" cried Tim's wife, sternly. "It's his, and you sha'n't take it from him."

"Hallo! old woman! So you're a-mixin' in too? Well, shoot me if that ain't rich! Oh! yes I'll give it to him. Next week, some time."

With a scornful laugh, he turned on his heel and plunged into the wood. Billy sprung up and started after him, desperate with rage and despair.

But one of the other tramps thrust out his foot and tripped him up. He fell heavily to the earth, his face buried in the grass, and too miserable and hopeless to even wish to rise again.

CHAPTER XII.

TIM GOES FOR THE REWARD.

It was late in the next morning when Tim returned. The wagon was still in its wood corner, and the Gypsy-like party lying around loosely on the grass. Billy was still with them. He had no idea of running away now. Tim had stolen his treasure, and he must have that back. He would die rather than lose that.

The tramp's face was sullen and ill-tempered when he entered the inclosure. He had evidently been drinking hard, and was feeling the worse for his carouse.

"What you doin' here?" he growled. "Lazy-in' round like durned slouches! Git up and git, blast ye! Dash my toplights if I stand it. Whar's that boy?"

"In ther wagin," grunted Bandy Joe, as he crawled to his feet.

"In the wagon, shoot his pictur'? You're a-coddlin' him, blast ye! Wants me to larn him his place. I'll fotch the lazy brat out o' that!"

He snatched the heavy whip from the front of the wagon. When he reached the rear Billy, who had heard this conversation, had just sprung to the ground.

"So ye've took a hint, have ye? Reckon I'll have ter guv ye a lesson, anyhow."

"Don't hit me, Mas'r Tim," said Billy, in a

voice new to the tramp. "You've whopped me enough for nothin'!"

"What's ye goin' ter do 'bout it? Ain't goin' ter show fight, hey?"

"You're a strong man, and I'm only a weak little boy," answered Billy, slowly yet resolutely. "You kin whop me if you want. I ain't strong 'nough to stop it. But you'd better not."

"Why?" Tim was taken all aback.

"That's enough. I won't say nothin' more."

The astounded tramp turned sourly to his wife, with a frown of rage.

"This is some more o' your coddlin'," he shouted. "What ye been puttin' inter the boy? 'Tain't nat'ral fur him ter talk that way."

"Shet yer jaw, Tim," she coolly answered. "Ye got the biggest gabble mill I ever see'd. Didn't s'pose ye could allers go on kickin' and siatherin', did ye? Why, there ain't a toad in the road but 'd kick ag'in' it in time, let alone a boy as is got good blood in his veins."

Tim looked at her sullenly. He could see that his wife had her blood up, and he knew enough to leave her alone at such times.

He turned and looked savagely at the boy, who stood pale but unflinching. He raised the whip and made it whistle through the air, while his teeth gritted. Then suddenly he turned and flung it into the wagon.

"Got 'nough o' this," he growled. "Git on the road lively now, and jog on ter the next halt. And mind yer eye 'bout this young rattlesnake. Ef he slips somebody 'll git hurt. Mind me. I'll find ye 'bout grub time or thereaway. Got some 'ti'kular bizness."

He turned and walked away with a muttered curse. Tyrant as he was he was a coward as well, and the boy's rebellion had cowed him.

The harnessing of the horse slowly proceeded. Tim had disappeared. In a few minutes they were ready for the road again.

Mrs. Buster climbed into the wagon and called for her *protégé*.

"Reckon the hoss kin pull us two, Billy," she said. "He ain't over-powerful, but ye're a light weight. Got ter keep an eye on ye, too, 'ca'se Tim's a terror if he gits wrothy. Pile in, my pretty."

Billy would rather have walked, but the two tramps picked him up and landed him in the vehicle.

On they jogged, mile after mile. The two tramps after a while left the wagon. When they returned, after an hour's absence, they brought with them a fair supply of provisions. Placing their material in the wagon they jogged on behind it, slowly but untiringly.

It was mid-afternoon when they next came to a halt. They were now many miles from the city. A piece of woodland bordered the road, as at their last stopping-place. Into this the horse was turned. He hauled the wagon for some distance under the trees, and was then brought to rest in an open space well canopied with green leaves.

They were not long in making an attack on the cold lunch they had provided.

That duty done, they stretched themselves on the grass with their pipes.

"Rich folks talk 'bout life," remarked Bandy. "Why, there ain't one on 'em knows what life is. Wonder if ther's any o' ther palaces that's up ter a pipe under a green tree?"

"Sartain not," answered Tom. "Guv me natur', fore luxury."

It was certainly delightful there, in that soft breeze and pleasant shade, and Billy enjoyed it as much as any of them as he lay in a nest of long grass. He had, for the time, forgotten his unhappy situation.

This summer siesta was, after a time, broken by the sound of wheels and voices in the road, and then of footsteps coming into the wood.

The next moment Tim made his appearance. He looked around till his eyes fell on Billy.

"Guess it's all right," he spoke, in a loud voice. "Wake up, there, you ugly-jawed barn-burnin' brat. Come on, gentlemen."

Billy rose to his feet, not knowing what to expect. He was instantly caught by the collar in a tight grip. The next minute several men could be seen advancing under the trees.

Billy started and turned both red and pale as his eyes fell on the foremost of these. It was Jerry Wilson, the farmer.

"Yere he is," yelled Tim, lustily. "Yere's the ongrateful young hound as sot yer barn afire, an' arter all you'd done fur 'im. Come an' snatch 'im, fur he's a disgrace ter honest comp'ny."

The men advanced. Besides the farmer there was Jake, and a stern-faced man who looked like a constable. The latter relieved Tim from his hold on the boy's collar.

"I'll take care of this young gentleman," he said. "So this is the chap that's been giving us the slip so long? He don't look like a very bad one."

Billy looked appealingly from one to the other of his captors.

"Whatare you goin' to do with me?" he asked.

"You'll find that out soon enough. Come along. We're going to give you a ride now. You identify him, Jerry?"

"Of course I do. It was him set fire to the barn. I'll swear to that."

The constable pulled his prisoner away. He was followed by Jerry and Jake. Tim came hastily and angrily after them.

"Jist s'pose ye fork over that plunder, Jerry Wilson," he cried angrily. "I ain't goin' to save hosses and catch barn-burners fur ye fur nothin'. Fork over, or ye sha'n't have the boy. I've on'y to guv the word and ye can't take him a yard."

Jerry looked back at the stout and surly ruffians who had lifted their heads from the grass to listen to this conversation.

Then he slowly and reluctantly drew out his purse, and counted out some money.

"Here," he said, curtly. "Take it, and never let me see your evil face again."

Tim took and counted it.

"That's all right," he remarked. "Does me good ter bleed a skinflint. Now git. I've see'd enough o' yer dirty phiz."

"Ye ain't goin' to take blood-money, Tim Buster?" cried his wife in a high tone.

"Shet up, woman. Don't be makin'a show o' yerself."

"I won't shet up. An' I want nothin' more to do with ye. Ye've done many a dirty trick, but this is 'bout the dirtiest."

This was all the departing party heard of the conjugal conversation. The farmer and Jake climbed into the wagon in which the officer had already deposited his prisoner, and in a minute more were driving briskly away.

Billy was silent. He had recognized the utter uselessness of words. He was in the hands of fate, and must bear what came to him.

Within two hours afterward he found himself locked within a cell of the county jail on the serious charge of setting fire to Jeremiah Wilson's barn, and the prospect of spending four or five years in prison.

Yet the boy was in that state of resigned desperation in which nothing can arouse feeling. He was stupefied with misery. Days passed away in his prison cell, yet he remained in a half-torpid state, eating, drinking and sleeping as mechanically as if he had lost all the active part of his life.

For a month this continued. He had had one or two preliminary examinations, yet he had gone through them in a dull, stupid way, as if nothing could rouse him to a sense of his situation.

"They can't no more than hang me," he kept muttering. "And I don't keer how soon they do it."

One afternoon, just before the day fixed for his trial, the cell door was opened by the turnkey, and a gentleman walked in.

Billy looked up in the listless manner into which he had fallen. But a sudden change came over his expression as he caught sight of his visitor's face.

"Mr. Gordon!" he gasped. "You comin' to see me?"

"I would have been here long ago, my boy, if I had known your trouble," he remarked, in his kindly voice, as he caught the poor captive's hand. "I have been searching for you, and only by chance read of your arrest."

"I never sot fire to it!" cried Billy, in a tone of deep appeal. "'Twasn't me, Mr. Gordon!"

"Yes, yes, my poor fellow!" came the soothing voice. "I know you are innocent. It was that tramp that you told me of."

"Everybody says it was me. But it wasn't, Mr. Gordon. Indeed it wasn't."

"I believe you, Billy. Don't say another word about it. No harm shall come to you. I will engage the best lawyer in the county to defend you. But I want now to talk to you about something else. And now sit right still, Billy, and answer me a few questions. You remember how you left my house, and the paper you had the fight about?"

"Oh yes! The paper I wanted you to read, and that the little—your little boy, I mean—snatched out of my hand."

"He is not my boy, thank Heaven!" ejaculated Mr. Gordon. "He was my wife's son be fore I married her. But it is about that paper I want to talk. Where did you get it?"

"Why, I took it from Tim Buster."

"Tim Buster, the tramp," repeated Mr. Gordon, with a strange look. "Not the Master

Tim that brought you up, and treated you so badly?"

"I ain't goin' to call him Mas'r Tim no more. He ain't my mas'r now."

"You got that paper from him?" Mr. Gordon's voice was full of energy, and a deep light glittered in his eyes. "Where is he to be found? I must see him."

"Trampin' 'round somewhere," answered Billy. "Ain't easy to tell. But they say that it's him as is goin' to send me to jail."

"Ah! He is a witness against you? That is good. I can find him, then. Don't you fear, my boy. Trust to me. I will see that you have justice."

"Will you, Mr. Gordon? A poor little chap like me?"

"You have been ill-used, my boy. Trust to me."

"Yes, I will, I will!" cried the poor boy, flinging himself into Mr. Gordon's arms, and breaking into a flood of tears.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SURPRISE AND A TRIAL.

It was the morning of the day that had been set for the young prisoner's trial, on the charge of setting fire to Jeremiah Wilson's barn.

But Billy hailed the coming of the day in a far different frame of mind from that in which he had been before Mr. Gordon's visit. He had been cheered up and made hopeful by this visit, and had regained all his lost life and spirit.

And his kind friend had kept his word in providing him with counsel, in the form of one of the shrewdest lawyers of the county.

On the evening preceding the trial a business matter called Mr. Gordon to one of the disreputable quarters of the city.

Quickly finishing his errand he started to return to a more savory locality. Passing one dark corner he noticed casually two persons talking in an obscure corner. One of them was an ill-dressed, sorry-looking fellow, of bloated and brutal countenance. The other was a woman, dressed in plain black, and closely veiled. The fancy came to the merchant's mind that she was of much the same size and shape with his wife.

He passed on, however, paying no attention to this idea. But just as he did so the two persons parted, the woman turning toward him. And at that moment a sudden gust of wind caught and lifted her veil. The light of a neighboring lamp fell upon her face. The astounded man recognized his wife.

He stood like a stone statue as she came up and passed, without noticing him.

Should he follow? was the thought that ran through his mind. No. He would not act the spy upon his wife. But there was that tramp-like fellow. He was perfectly justified in following him.

The man had already left the spot, and was moving along at a slouching gait.

Mr. Gordon kept on his track, at a distance. He had not far to go. In less than a square the tramp stopped at a grogery, and went in.

The merchant stopped outside, rather dubious about entering such a place. There was no secrecy about the saloon, however. The windows

were raised and any one privileged to look and listen.

The tramp was standing by the bar, in company with two or three others of his kind. The landlord was just pouring them out drink.

"Made a stake? You bet," ejaculated the man in whom Mr. Gordon was interested. "Just struck a gold-mine. Goin' to make somebody bleed, lively. Liquor up ag'in, lads. It's my treat, right through."

"Let's see the color of your cash, Tim," suggested the landlord.

"Why, blame yer ugly snout, do yer dare surmise as I'm spongin'? See yere, old hoss." He drew his hand from his pocket, and slapped it on the counter with a fistfull of silver. "Got 'nough to smother you, blast yer eyes!"

"Then ain't you going to redeem that little affair you pledged for whisky a month ago?"

"You bet I am. Glad you spoke on't. Plug it out. Tain't wu'th much ter you, but I bet it pays me lively. Salt it down, right yere."

The landlord turned and took something from a drawer behind him. A glitter came from it in the light of the room. Mr. Gordon started. Had he recognized anything familiar?

"Pass over a five," said the landlord. "That's what you had on't."

"Lemme see if it's right fu'st."

He took the square, gold-colored frame, and forced it open by a spring. The face of a lovely portrait gleamed out.

"Yere's yer fiver, Boney. Why, I wouldn't take less nor a twenty, planked down in hard cash, fur that charmer."

"Twenty's yer figure, is it?" asked one of his companions.

"Ef any coon's got a twenty that's a-burnin' his pocket, and planks it down here, I guess we'll make a swop," declared the tramp, striking the portrait case heavily down on the bar.

"That is a bargain," said a voice behind him, in a strangely-repressed tone. "I will make that exchange."

Two hands were reached forward over his shoulder. One of them seized the portrait case. The other laid a handful of coin on the bar.

"Count that," came the hoarse command.

Instead of doing so, the tramp turned and stared in the face of the speaker, though he took care to lay one hand on the coins as he did so.

He saw before him a well-dressed, fine-featured gentleman, yet as pale as if milk instead of blood ran in his veins, and with a face as excited and disturbed as if he had seen a ghost.

"Hello, boss!" cried the tramp. "Who's you?"

"Never mind who. You made an offer and I've taken you at your word." The gentleman's voice was strongly repressed, as if he was forcing back a gush of deep emotion. "There's more than twenty there. But you can have the balance for your name."

"Dunno as I'm 'shamed o' my name, though it never brung me in five cents afore. My name's Tim Buster, at your service."

He turned and swept the money from the whisky-stained bar into his pocket. He did not need to count it to see that he had been amply paid.

"Tim Buster! I'll give you as much more if you'll answer me a few questions."

Tim looked at him oddly.

"Dunno as I've got anything more ter sell, jest now," he said. "Guess I'm purty rich fur a tramp. Come to me next week when this is all spent. Money ain't no object ter me, 's long's I've got 'nough fur a solid drunk."

Tim meant it, too. No offers could get anything more out of him. But Mr. Gordon, despite the excited state of his feelings, could see that dangerous looks were passing between the other men present. He recognized that he was in peril. Turning sharply, without another word, he hurried from the room. He had gained a prize which he would not have risked for all his fortune.

Some of the men would have followed him from the saloon, but Tim stopped them with a knowing leer.

"Let the old judge alone. He's my oyster. He'll bleed lively yit. I've got an ideer. But I ain't goin' to be druv. Got to see what's in it, fu'st. Let's likker."

This invitation settled the business. Mr. Gordon was let alone. The whisky-bottle had a stronger charm.

But we must take a step forward to the next day, and the country court in which the trial of the youthful prisoner was fixed to take place.

At the time of our entrance the case had been on for some time, and witnesses were being examined. The farmer had given in his testimony, and told the whole story of his finding the boy, and his kind treatment of him, until the ungrateful fellow ran away after being corrected for carelessness. But he took good care to say nothing about his efforts to discover the waif's parentage.

Jake testified much to the same effect, though the farmer's treatment of the boy did not seem so mild when he had got through. But this did not help Billy with the jury. It gave a reason for burning the barn, in revenge for ill-treatment.

Jonas Stark was the next witness called. All he had to tell was the story of the locking up of the boy, his escape by the window, and the search for him; with the breaking out of the fire soon afterward.

Other witnesses were examined, but nothing was brought out to directly connect Billy with the conflagration. There was no proof yet to convict him.

Finally Timothy Buster was called to the stand. There was more excitement now, for it had got abroad that this was the main witness for the prosecution.

Tim had evidently been drinking hard overnight, and was anything but sober yet.

He fixed his twinkling eyes on the youthful prisoner with a sour malignity, as if Billy had done him some serious injury.

The prosecuting attorney confined his questions to the events of the night of the conflagration, and brought out the evidence that Tim had seen the fire from some distance off down the road, and had hurried up toward it.

"Comin' up," he continued. "I heerd a noise in ther cornfield, like as if somebody was a-shuckin' corn. I jumped in and who should I see but a young galoot, who was divin' out like

mad. He guv'a kind o'squeal when he see'd me. I made a grab for 'im, but he skooted round and shot down another furrer. Tried ter foller him, but mought as well ha chased a buck-rabbit."

"How near the barn was this?"

"Not more'n twenty yards or so."

"In what direction was he coming?"

"Plum from the barn."

"Would you recognize the boy again?"

"Reckon 's how I would."

"Look at the prisoner at the bar, and answer if he is or is not the boy you met."

Tim turned and gazed on Billy with a malicious squint.

"Reckon 's how it's him. Could swear ter that on a pile o' cocoanuts."

Further questions brought out the services of the tramp in saving the horses and machinery. It was the object of the attorney to strengthen the testimony of his sorry-looking witness as much as possible.

"That is all," announced the prosecutor.

"Much 'bliged," answered Tim. "S'pose I kin toddle now?"

"Not yet," remarked the prisoner's counsel, rising. "I want to ask you a few questions."

"Hope yer won't be long 'bout it. 'Caze this am kinder dry provender."

"Look at that article and tell me if it belongs to you." He handed the prisoner a pipe-bowl, of imitation meerschaum.

Tim looked at it in surprise.

"Whar'd you git that?" he demanded.

"No matter. Isn't that your pipe?"

"Got my 'nitals scratched on't," admitted Tim. "Dunno whar you got it. Used ter have sich a pipe, I 'low. But it war stole from me 'bout the time that boy guv me the go-by. Allers s'pected he stole it."

The lawyer took the pipe from Tim and passed it to the jury.

"You hear, gentlemen. He admits the ownership of this article. It was found, as you see it, in the ruins of the barn, with the stem burned off. I shall bring evidence that it was in the witness' possession just before the fire."

Tim wilted a little at this.

"Yer can't do't," he muttered, grimly. "Ther rat he stole it from me. And he's been a-smokin' it in ther barn when it was sot afire."

The lawyer looked at him keenly.

"How could he have stolen it? Then you knew the prisoner before?"

"Sartain. I brung up that there little viper. Tuk him out o' charity from his parients when he wasn't five year old, and wasted nough perwisions on him ter fatten a hog. Then, soon's he were old enough ter be o' use, he ups and runs away, like an ongrateful vagabond as he is."

Tim, in his effort at righteous indignation, was putting his foot in it deeper than he thought. The lawyer's eyes twinkled.

"You got the boy from his parents when he was not five years old? Where was this?"

"Way out West," answered Tim. "Somewhar in Californy."

"How came they to give him up?"

"Kicked the bucket," replied Tim. "Went up the flume. The dad was a pard o'mine. Died o' whisky, as he was too blazin' fond on. The

mammy pegged out jist arter. Me an' my old 'oman tuck ther brat out o' charity, 'cause we hadn't none o' our own."

"You should be rewarded for your benevolence," said the lawyer, dryly. "By the way, will you tell me what you know about this piece of paper?"

He handed Tim a crumpled and dirty slip of writing-paper.

An oath of astonishment and fury burst from the witness's lips as he perceived it.

"There's more o' his ongratefulness!" he shouted, thrown off his base by this sudden attack. "He stole that, too, blame his pictur'!"

"Then you acknowledge it to be yours?"

"Yes—n—no. Dunno what ye'r' talkin' bout. Tain't what I thought. Never see'd this paper afore, as I'm a livin' man."

Tim had recovered from his momentary mental upset, and was himself again.

But at this point the opposing attorney interposed with serious objections to these questions. They were not cross-examination, he declared, and had no bearing on the case.

"Will your Honor please examine this paper?" remarked Billy's lawyer, taking the paper from Tim and handing it up to the judge. "And will you permit me to give to the court the object of the questions I have put to the witness, and to tell what I hope to prove?"

The judge cast his eye over the paper. A look of surprise and interest came on his face.

"Go on, Mr. Thompson," he said. "We will hear your statement."

"Then, your Honor, it is my object to show that this unfortunate youth is the child of rich parents, from whom he was kidnapped in his childhood, by this man, who has always been the miserable wretch you see him now."

"It's a lie!" broke in Tim, furiously. "I never kidnapped the kid."

"You bought him from the woman who did, and that paper is your bargain with her, to keep the boy out of sight for so much per year. I shall go on to prove that you ill-treated the helpless child shamefully, and that you turned him adrift when your employer ceased her annual payments."

"He was a dirty and lazy little villain, as had no talent fur bizness," muttered Tim.

"That is to say, you couldn't teach him to lie or steal. I shall further seek to prove, your Honor, that the farmer was as hard on the boy as the tramp, and that the spirited lad was forced to run away from ill-treatment. As for the value of this man's evidence the jury can judge. He was himself smoking in the barn before it took fire, as can be proved by his own pipe being found in the ashes. As for his testimony against the prisoner, I can prove that he swore revenge on him for the loss of that dangerous document."

A sharp debate took place between the lawyers, as to whether such questions were admissible in cross-examination. The judge finally decided that they were not.

Mr. Thompson took his seat with a quiet smile. He had gained all he desired. His side of the case was fully before the jury.

Other witnesses were examined, who testified to the search for the fugitive, and his final ap-

pearance, on the second day, at the city wharf, which he had gained by swimming the stream.

Mr. Thompson next followed with a brief but telling opening of the case for the prisoner, after which he proceeded to call witnesses.

Among these were Mrs. Buster and the two tramps. The former was questioned about the first acquisition of the waif. She knew nothing, except that Tim had brought her the child. Where he came from she couldn't tell. But her evidence was fatal to Tim's story of how he acquired the child, and also showed that he was in the habit of receiving money from some secret source, unknown to her. He had turned the boy adrift in his anger at these payments being stopped.

Both she and the two tramps were then questioned about the pipe. It was Tim's, no doubt. Bandy Joe had himself scratched the initials on it. He had seen Tim have it less than two months before.

Jake, Mr. Wilson's hired man, was the next witness, and testified that he had found the pipe, while engaged in clearing up the ruins of the barn. It lay directly under the hay mow.

We may hasten to the conclusion of the trial. It was evident to everybody that the accused boy was innocent. The jury gave their verdict without leaving their seats.

"Not guilty."

"A very proper verdict," remarked the judge. "You are dismissed, gentlemen of the jury. Officer, arrest the witness, Timothy Buster, on the charge of incendiarism. The prisoner is discharged from custody."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REWARD OF THE CONSPIRATORS.

"I've done my share of the job," declared Jerry Wilson to Jonas Stark, as those two worthies drove together into the city in the farmer's rattling vehicle. "I didn't quite get the boy under lock and key, but I know where to find him, and the tramp that stole him is in safe keeping."

"Now you want me to do my share?"

"Yes. And then an even divide of the reward. That's the bargain."

"All right, old boy. I'm a man of my word, square through. You shall have as much as I get, and that's a big offer, for the thing would never have been worked out only for me."

"You're terrible secret about it," grumbled the farmer. "Why can't you let a man know what you've found out?"

"Don't mind, so long as we're partners," answered Jonas. "Just keep your ears open for a bit, and I'll let you into the secret. This is the whole story: Ten years ago there was a merchant in San Francisco named Henry Johnson. He had a young son, about five years old, in whom he was mightily wound up. This was the child of his first wife, who had died when the boy was not more than three. The merchant had married a second wife, and had another son, three months old. The first wife was a lively woman, but the second one had a touch of a lively temper, so folks said. You follow me?"

"Oh, yes. Go on."

"Very well. The boy was kidnapped. The oldest one, I mean. You can wager there was a

high old stir. I was in Frisco at the time. The father nearly went mad with trouble, and kept offering rewards till he ran them up to thirty thousand, and no questions asked. But the boy didn't come back. Nobody's stepped in after that thirty thousand yet. I reckon the offer still holds good."

"My!" exclaimed Jerry. "Thirty thousand!"

"Every penny of it. Well, I've been inquiring round and I've learned a thing or two. I can't hit the track of Henry Johnson. Maybe he's dead. If he is, we're flunked. But his wife's still living, and I know where to lay my hand on her."

"You do?"

"You bet! I had an interview with Tim Buster, and he's let me into a secret. The second wife is in this city, and I know where to find her. Married to a second husband, I reckon."

"You don't tell me that?" ejaculated Jerry. "And Tim owned up to stealing the boy?"

"He bought the boy," answered Jonas. "It seems this woman, who didn't want a rival to her own precious son, stole the boy and sold him to Tim, under the promise to pay so much a year for his keep. She gave Tim a written bargain to that effect. And that is the paper that turned up in court."

"My! She must be a sweet one! But I don't see how we're to get any reward if the father's dead."

"I've a notion that he ain't dead," rejoined Jonas. "But here we are. Hitch up, and we'll drop in to see a gentleman."

They had stopped near the wharves. Hitching the horse Jonas led the way to an office on the wharf that had on it the sign of

"HENRY GORDON,

"Dealer in Roofing Materials."

Mr. Gordon was seated at his desk as his visitor entered. He looked up.

"Can you give us five minutes, on important private business?" asked Jonas.

"Private business?"

"I will not beat round the bush," remarked Jonas. "I know that time is precious to a business man. I wish to ask if you remember the time, ten years ago, when a merchant of San Francisco, named Henry Johnson, was robbed of his child?"

Mr. Gordon sharply started. But, with what seemed a great effort, he recovered his composure.

"I lived in that city at the time. I remember it well," he answered.

"He offered a large reward?"

"Thirty thousand dollars."

"Do you know what became of Henry Johnson?"

"Perfectly well."

"You married his wife?"

"I did."

"Then he is dead?"

"That doesn't follow."

"But if he is alive he must still wan this child, and be willing to pay the reward he offered. You will excuse me, Mr. Gordon, for speaking plain business. It happens that this gentleman

and myself have found the child, but we cannot discover the father. You know where to find the father but not the child. I propose that we put our information together, restore the child to the parent, and divide the reward. You see that I am coming to the point, Mr. Gordon."

"Quite rapidly," was the quiet answer.

"Well, sir, how does the scheme strike you?"

"As a decidedly rascally one."

"Sir!"

"A rascally one, I say. Quite worthy of Jonas Stark and Jeremiah Wilson."

"You know us?"

"I have that honor," was the dry reply.

Jonas was by this time boiling full of anger at the cool satire of the merchant.

"Sir," he cried, sharply, "I do not understand you. I tell you that I know where to lay my hands on the child, and you on the father. The parentage can be proved. The boy still keeps a miniature portrait, on ivory, of his mother. And there is abundant other proof of his identity."

Mr. Gordon started again, but quickly recovered his composure.

"I do not believe you," he said. "The boy you speak of has nothing of the kind."

"Sir," cried Jonas, springing up in a rage, "do you mean to give me the lie? Do you think I do not see through you? Henry Johnson is dead and you have got hold of his wife and property together. You are afraid this lost son will turn up and claim his father's estate as heir. I'll tell you more. The child was not stolen by kidnappers, but by your own wife."

Mr. Gordon sat back in his chair and looked at them with an odd smile, which they could not quite understand.

"I will tell you this," he began. "Mr. Johnson is still alive, even if I have married his wife. As for the boy, you are telling me no news. I know it all. But you are mistaken about his having the portrait of his mother."

"Mistaken, sir? I saw him have it," cried Jerry.

"You did, eh? Was it anything like this?"

Mr. Gordon laid on the table the miniature he had recovered from Tim.

"That's it!" exclaimed Jerry. "How did you get it?"

"No matter. You see I have been working, as well as you. But you gentlemen know too much. You must be silenced."

"Money will do it," declared Jonas. "Eh, Jerry?"

"Far be it from me to do anything to injure a gentleman like Mr. Gordon."

The merchant rung a call-bell that lay on the table, still keeping his eyes fixed in that queer way on the precious pair.

A man entered.

"Send William to me."

In a few minutes more, very much to the surprise of the confederates, the William sent for entered, in the form of Billy Bubble!

He was nicely dressed, well cared for, and looked the little gentleman.

Jerry and Jonas sprung up, with exclamations of angry astonishment.

"Keep your seats, gentlemen," said the mer-

chant coolly. "I intend that you shall have your reward. But there needs to be a little explanation first, which I wish you to hear."

He rung the bell again. This time he whispered to the man who had entered. He went out, but returned in a minute with two of the workmen.

"There is a little business which I wish you to witness," remarked the merchant. "In the first place, come here, William. Tell me if you have ever seen this article before?"

He removed his hand from the portrait, which he had so far kept covered. Billy sprung forward with a sharp cry.

"It's mine!" he cried eagerly. "It's my dear picture, that Mas'r Tim stole from me! How did you get it? Oh, how did you get it, Mr. Gordon?"

"Where did you get it?" asked the merchant.

"Misses Buster gave it to me. She said it was mine. She'd kept it for me ever since I was a little chap. I wasn't never to let nobody see it. I guess from what she said it was my mother, my own mother."

His voice was full of emotion, as he eagerly seized his lost prize.

Jerry and Jonas sat thunderstruck. They did not know what to make of this proceeding.

"It is your mother's picture," said Mr. Gordon, with a tone of forced calmness. "I knew her well, my boy. You were stolen when a child. Your father's name was Henry Johnson. Your loss almost killed him."

"Where is my father?" murmured the poor boy.

"What does this mean?" cried Jonas, no longer able to keep silent. "Is this your *bargain*?"

"I will keep my bargain," answered the merchant. "You shall have your reward."

He reached out his hands and took Billy by the shoulders, holding him erect before his face. There was a strange yearning in his eyes. The boy trembled with an undefined emotion.

"Mr. Johnson was a rich man," continued the speaker. "But he lost all his wealth. Four years ago an uncle of his died, and left him his estate, on condition that he should take his name with it. To this he consented. Henry Johnson's name was changed, by act of the California Legislature, to Henry Gordon. He is now before you."

"Oh!" cried Billy in irrepressible emotion. "Not my father? Not my dear father?"

"My son! My own loved, lost son!" cried the merchant, suddenly giving way to his long-repressed feeling, and folding the boy ardently to his heart.

It was a scene that brought tears to the eyes of the rough workmen present.

But there were no signs of such feeling in the fooled conspirators. They sprung to their feet in fury and dismay.

"By the Lord, we'll pay you out for this!" cried Jonas, as he stamped to the door.

"Wait, gentlemen," exclaimed the merchant. "You shall get the reward you have earned. Take them, men. You have your orders."

The three men present instantly seized on the baffled villains and dragged them out to the wharf, despite their struggles and protests.

When they left there, fifteen minutes afterward, they were covered with tar from head to foot, which had been swabbed on them liberally by the workmen.

Mr. Gordon stood in the office door as they departed.

"You have been rewarded according to your deserts," he remarked. "If you are not satisfied, suppose you bring suit for damages. And the next time you take on a farm-boy, Jeremiah Wilson, try and learn to treat him like a human being."

The discomfited villains hastened to their wagon, and drove off with curses and threats of revenge.

But, heedless of this, the merchant turned back to his new-found son, with a heart and a face that were overflowing with joy. Life had suddenly grown rich to him. He had found his stolen son, and had punished all those who had injured the boy. Tim Buster, the main culprit, was in jail, and likely to stay there long enough for repentance.

As for his wife, Mr. Gordon had entered suit for divorce from her. He could not look again on the face of a woman who had so vitally injured him.

We may very briefly dispose of the remainder of our story.

The farmer and his confederate brought no suit for damages. They were very well content to let their share in the business sink into oblivion.

Mr. Gordon had no difficulty in obtaining a divorce. A promise not to prosecute for the old crime induced his wife to grant all he demanded.

As for Tim Buster, there was no thought of sparing him, and he got ten years in prison as his penalty for kidnapping.

But Mrs. Buster was taken care of. Mr. Gordon could not forget her kindness to his son, and saw that she was placed in a comfortable condition.

Billy Bubble, or William Gordon, as we must now call the handsome young gentleman that bears that name, is to-day a very different person from the waif that was picked up by the farmer on the highway, and is the pride and joy of his father's heart.

Time has cured its many evils, and mended its broken lives.

THE END.

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